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THE PERSPECTIVE

Magazine

SINCE 1963

Mounting Pressure

The Politics of Sustainability and European Security

Editors' Note

What do we mean by sustainability, and can such a concept ever truly expire? For Europeans, the green battle has been a constant backdrop. From kindergarten, pollution and climate change have been framed as existential threats. For the EU, this has long been a central concern. On a continent where peace is taken for granted, the enemy for years seemed to be the acrid smoke from chimneys, not armed conflict.

Yet, our attention abruptly shifted. Once again, we found ourselves looking towards a battlefield threatening our landscapes, forcing the "green" struggle into the background. It would be cynical to claim war had vanished while Europe enjoyed peace; conflicts raged not far away. But human attention sharpens when a distant crisis becomes a tangible threat. Over recent years, we have been reminded that safeguarding our habitat is inseparable from responding to the external pressures that have reintroduced images many thought were confined to history books.

This tension is at the heart of this issue of Perspective Magazine: the intersection of sustainability and European security. The EU must now confront two urgent challenges simultaneously: maintaining a credible sustainability agenda while navigating an unstable geopolitical landscape. We examine how these themes intertwine, from technology to the political and commercial challenges facing the EU, including the green value chain and the transformation of electric mobility.

Closer to home, our youth knowledge-exchange between UPF and RSR advanced with the RSR delegation's visit to Lund this November. Reflections on that visit are best left to the UPF and RSR Presidents in their addresses.

We thank our editorial team for helping bring these reflections together, reminding us that Europe's future relies on balancing sustainability with security, without losing sight of either, and on working together constructively.

Sincerely,

Olivia Lindgren & Filippo Fioretti Boccato

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Mounting Pressure - January 2026 - Issue No.2

UPF's Address

Ella Hellerup | President of UPF

Dear Readers,

Another semester has gone by in Lund, and while I am writing this on the train back home to my family, I have time to reflect on the semester we're leaving behind. Throughout the semester, my colleagues in UPF Lund have continued to impress me with their drive and innovation.

The Travel Committee organised yet another successful trip; this time the adventure went to Montreal and Ottawa in Canada. During the trip, the group had time to visit the House of Commons, attend a hockey game, and enjoy many activities in between! To quote the participants' own words, they left not only with new memories, but also with new perspectives on what it means to engage with the world beyond our borders.

In mid-November, I stood under my umbrella in the pouring rain at Lund Central Station to welcome RSR to our beloved city. Even though the weather did not show Lund in its best light, we quickly discovered it did little to dampen the spirit of our time together. Over the four days we spent together, we showed them around Lund and Malmö, shared dinners, and attended a variety of lectures that sparked both discussion and reflection. A clear highlight was the Anna Lindh Lecture 2025 with EU Commissioner Hadja Lahbib, which offered a moment to pause and reflect on dialogue, responsibility, and the role we each play in shaping a more open and humane future.

As you read this, another semester has just begun, bringing with it a sense of anticipation and possibility. There is much to look forward to in the months ahead: new projects, new conversations, and new challenges that will shape our time together. Alongside my colleagues, I am truly excited to continue carrying forward the spirit and values that define UPF Lund. Building on what has already been achieved, I look forward to seeing how we can grow, evolve, and reach new heights together over the coming semester.

Enjoy your reading!

Ella Hellerup
President of UPF Lund 2025/2026

This magazine has been jointly produced by UPF Lund and RSR Tartu as part of the Erasmus+ Cooperation project Nordic/Baltic Youth Knowledge Exchange. The project includes the publication of three magazines and two knowledge exchange trips to the respective associations.

This initiative aims to strengthen connections between young foreign affairs enthusiasts in the Nordic and Baltic regions. Through this collaboration, UPF Lund and RSR Tartu seek to build a network of young thinkers, deepen mutual understanding across the Nordic-Baltic region, and promote values of democracy, human rights, and cooperation.

This publication is funded by the European Union.

RSR's Address

Dear Readers,

We are honoured to present the second co-published issue, which is part of the meaningful outcome of the Nordic-Baltic Youth Knowledge Exchange. This collaboration has been both intellectually and personally rewarding and eye-opening, and we are grateful for the opportunity to work alongside UPF Lund.

In November of last year, members of RSR had the opportunity to visit Lund, where we were hosted with warmth and generosity by UPF Lund. Centred on The Politics of Sustainability and European Security—the same thematic focus as this issue—the exchange provided valuable insights into both the challenges and achievements related to European security and sustainability.

The articles contributed by RSR reflect the knowledge and perspectives gained through lectures, discussions, and encounters during the visit, as well as a more in-depth reflection on our exchange experience. For example, these contributions draw in particular on a lecture by Dr Jana Wrange, a researcher specialising in civil defence, and an interview with James Pamment, Director of the Lund University Psychological Defence Research Institute.

Beyond the formal academic programme, the exchange was enriched by memorable experiences in and around Lund, including engaging discussions at the Estonian House in Lund, the city's welcoming atmosphere—reminiscent of Tartu—and its truly vibrant intellectual community. These moments strengthened not only our academic cooperation but also the personal connections that really underpin meaningful international collaboration.

We extend our sincere thanks to UPF Lund for their hospitality and openness, and we look forward to continuing this partnership. We are already eagerly anticipating welcoming UPF Lund to Tartu in March this year!

Sincerely,
RSR

Tartu University's RSR Members 2025

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Ricardo Stuckert | Lula da Silva with Ursula von der Leyen at COP30 | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 4.0

Sustainability and Security: a Never-Ending Calculus

Tara Srikkanth | UPF | Opinion

When the COP30 summit closed in Belém, Brazil, in late November 2025, headlines all over the world were dominated by the failure to arrive at an agreement dealing decisively with a transition away from fossil fuels. The blame for this failure has largely been placed at the feet of countries set to profit from the status quo, as they spent the summit in fierce opposition to any deal requiring a cutback on the production, use, and export of fossil fuels. Simultaneously, the news reported that Sweden now ranks thirteenth in the Climate Change Performance Index—a list it sat at the head of only five years ago. How can we understand these developments in a time when we seem to be surrounded by an ever-increasing commitment to a green transition and cleaner, more holistic living?

Two terms used by all sides of the political spectrum to further the users' own agenda are 'sustainability' and 'security'—words that may seem simple at first glance, but that can be utilised or weaponised in a wide variety of contexts. Where one person might say 'security' and mean territorial security, ensured through militarisation and rigid borders, another might use the same word to indicate energy security—guaranteed and reasonably priced access to a consistent source of electricity or fuel.

Similarly, while one person might refer to holistic practices, renewable energy and environmental sustainability when talking about 'sustainability', another might use the same term to indicate respect for human rights, equal wages, and otherwise

equitable and socially sustainable practices.

By framing 'security' and 'sustainability' in certain ways, we can work to achieve goals that may run counter to other definitions of these words, enabling us to ride roughshod over the principles that govern one kind of sustainability in the name of another. A concrete example of this is the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, which is widely held as a necessity in the pursuit of environmental sustainability and the establishment of a secure future unburdened by climate change. The undeniable fact that the irresponsible use of fossil fuels and our planet's resources has led us to the brink of disaster is used to motivate unethical practices such as green extractivism in the Amazon and the violation of Indigenous peoples' rights in the Nordics.

Progress and development in our current political climate constitute an endless calculus between sustainability and security

Another dimension of this dilemma can be found in the EU's pursuit of energy security, which, more often than not, involves cooperating with states that engage in undemocratic and oppressive practices, sometimes amounting to systemic human rights abuses and violations of international law. Ensuring a steady supply of energy—which cannot be satisfied by domestic production—has entailed that countries like Kazakhstan, Libya, and Saudi Arabia supply the majority of the EU's petroleum oil imports. Hence, ensuring European energy security appears to require shaking hands with countries that fail to respect the very values that the EU claims to be founded on.

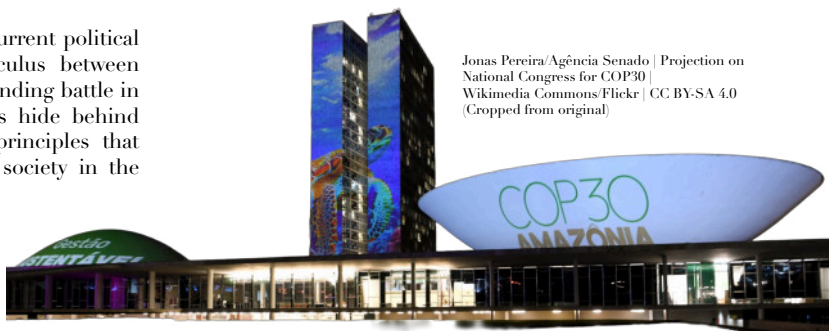
Progress and development in our current political climate constitute an endless calculus between sustainability and security, a never-ending battle in which politicians and policymakers hide behind facts and figures, overriding the principles that underpin one kind of sustainable society in the name of building another.

By framing 'security' and 'sustainability' in certain ways, we can work to achieve goals that may run counter to other definitions of these words

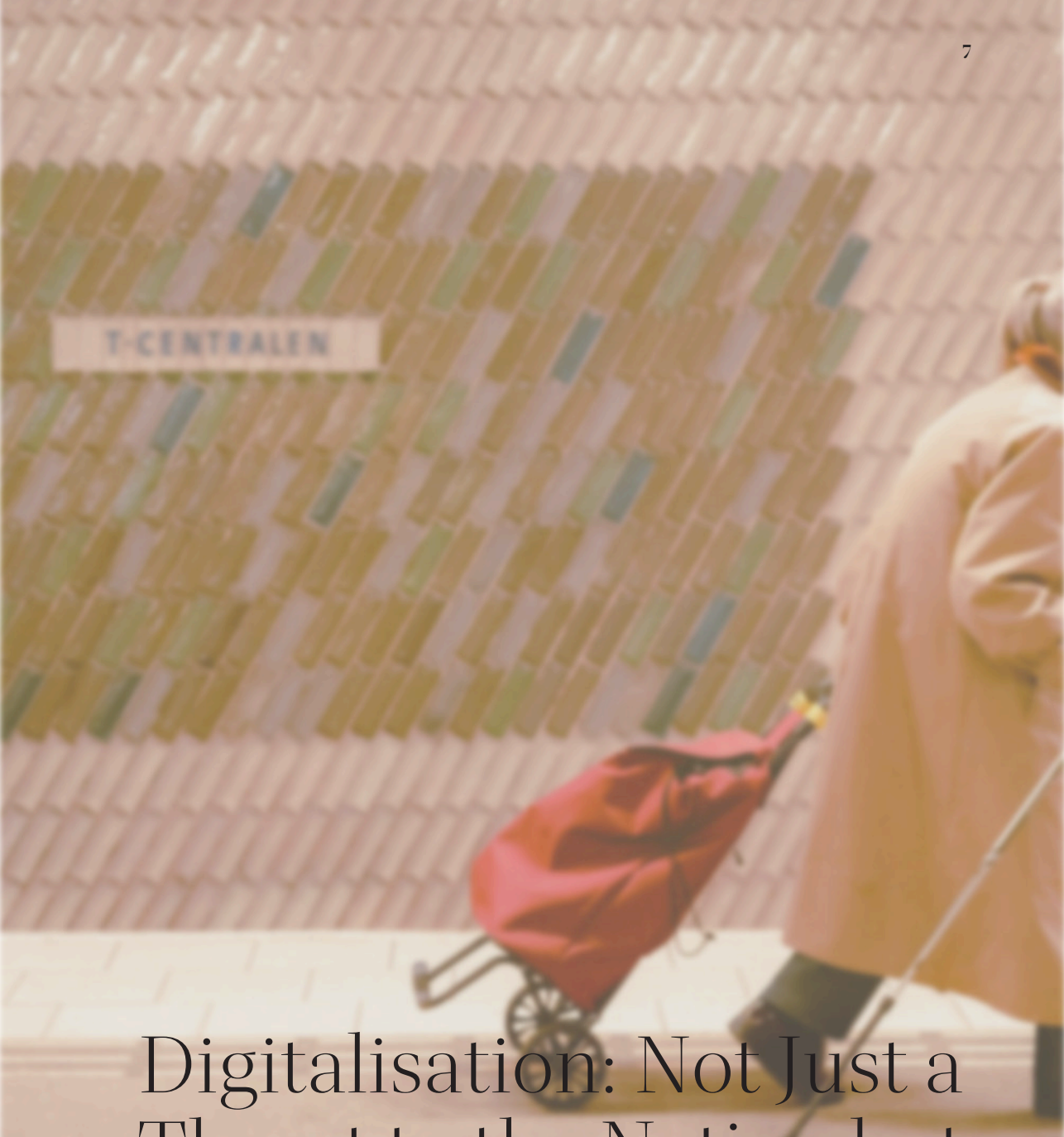
Sovereignty, dignity, and the right to self-determination are tossed aside in the name of financial gain and ensuring the well-being of one people at the cost of another

At the same time, it is fruitless to attempt to reduce these terms to single dimensions—doing so would effectively erase the breadth of perspectives and power structures that exist in the gaps between the warring definitions. Rather than striving for clarity and simplicity, we must further interrogate the complexities of the language used to defend or violate the principles that we believe are essential to building sustainable and secure societies.

The deal reached by the end of the COP30 summit has, in turn, been hailed as a triumph for international cooperation on climate issues and a catastrophe for the ongoing fight against climate change. If nothing else, this should tell us that a wealth of ambiguity and meaning hides in the language used regarding the climate and environmental measures. While it is easy to lose ourselves in philosophical discussions on abstract definitions, the COP30 climate talks serve as a useful reminder that the ways in which language is weaponised have real and tangible consequences for people all over the world. Reflecting on how we speak, write, and think about sustainability and security is, then, vital to understanding the developments that we see in the world around us.



Jonas Pereira/Agência Senado | Projection on National Congress for COP30 | Wikimedia Commons/Flickr | CC BY-SA 4.0 (Cropped from original)



Digitalisation: Not Just a Threat to the Nation but Also a Threat to You

Livia Söderberg | UPF | Opinion

You have probably noticed how a growing number of stores no longer accept cash, or how routine tasks increasingly require dedicated apps, or how you can no longer do things manually. You might also have thought to yourself: what would happen if I lost my phone and suddenly cannot buy a train ticket or contact people? Our daily lives have become intertwined with, and dependent on, our phones, the internet and on the possibility of constant access to everything. All things we could lose in a matter of seconds, when cyber attacks are looming on the horizon.

Over the past years, digitalisation has become a big part of Swedish society. Payment methods are reduced to card or Swish, and cash has disappeared almost entirely. While the older generation is having a harder time keeping up with the ever-changing digitalisation, young people are also struggling. Beyond the risk of alienation and other negative social impacts of digitalisation, cyber attacks constitute an increasingly prominent threat. A hit targeted at our monetary systems, for instance, could leave people unable to make payments or even access their money, resulting in chaos. According to the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), whose 2024 report analysed cyber threats from the second half of 2023 to the first half of 2024, there is an increase in both the quantity and variety of cyber attacks. According to the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), whose 2024 report analysed cyber threats from the second half of 2023 to the first half of 2024, there is an increase in both the quantity and variety of cyber attacks.

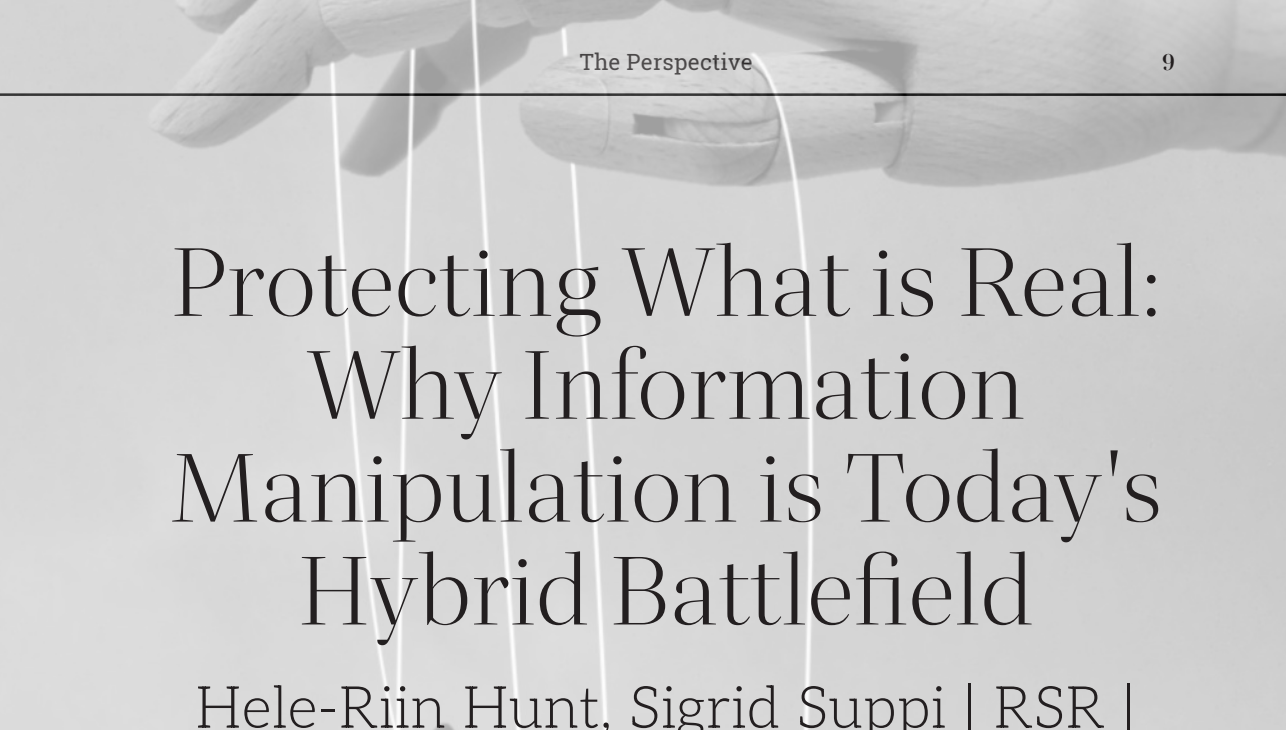
Our daily lives have become intertwined with, and dependent on, our phones, the internet and on the possibility of constant access to everything

The report highlights several key trends, including the geopolitical drivers behind the growing number of cyber operations and the strategic manipulation of information. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, such threats—including cyber attacks—have become notable across all of Europe. ENISA identifies four motives for cyber security attacks: financial gain, espionage, destruction and ideology.

So, how exactly could this affect you as an individual? The United Nations Development Programme's 2022 Special Report on Human Security, 'New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene: Demanding Greater Solidarity', discusses this dilemma of development. While digital technology is a great asset for discussing ideas, finding like-minded people and so on, it also poses grave danger for people in areas such as sexual exploitation, cyber-dependent crime, and political radicalisation. Cyber threats are therefore not just limited to national-level destruction, but also exist at an individual level. Propaganda is spreading on the internet, and it is becoming harder to tell the difference between truth and falsification.

How can we seek protection from the harm of technology? The use of surveillance, age restrictions, and blocking on social media is becoming more popular. In theory, these methods present an effective way of stopping people from being affected and damaged by harmful messages. However, when taken too far, surveillance itself may become a danger to human freedom, expression, and security from government overaction. The security of a nation and the EU is dependent on the security of its digital citizens, and when one's population is deceived by social media or can no longer access essential services such as groceries, communication, and entertainment, the nation is severely threatened.

The increasing digitalisation of Sweden has resulted in heightened national vulnerability to cyber warfare. These attacks threaten to destabilise not only Sweden but also the larger EU, as cyber attacks destroy or alter the political climate through the imposition of radical ideologies. This can affect the very core of a nation, its people and their human security. With the continuing development of digitalisation, it is critical to be aware of the consequences and remember that with digitalisation comes vulnerability.



Protecting What is Real: Why Information Manipulation is Today's Hybrid Battlefield

Hele-Riin Hunt, Sigrid Suppi | RSR | Interview-Analysis

Do those scenarios sound familiar? A shocking headline pops up in your social media feed, or yet another news report about unidentified drones near airports. Both of these situations are examples of hybrid warfare, but only one has become a constant background noise in our lives. Today, because information is consumed constantly, foreign information manipulation and interference has become a powerful hybrid weapon used to influence public opinion and create turmoil in society.

We had the opportunity to sit down with James Pamment, the Director of the Lund University Psychological Defence Research Institute, to discuss Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), mainly in an European context. The institute he leads focuses on analysing and countering hostile information influence operations and hybrid threats by foreign forces to make societies more resilient in defending democratic values.

"Nobody wants to be tricked", says Pamment

Surrounded by vast amounts of disinformation, it is becoming easier to manipulate the public with each passing day. "Nobody wants to be tricked", says Pamment. That is why, in his view, it is vital to protect what is real, rather than check everything that is wrong. And the responsibility of protecting what's real does not only fall on the shoulders of average people, media platforms or governments—everybody has a part to play.

Blurred Lines

According to Pamment, the idea of war has become blurred. We can no longer identify where the line between 'peace' and 'war' lies. For years, many argued over whether the annexation of Crimea was truly an invasion. Few believed it to be a prelude to the current war.

Lately, there has been an increasing number of ambiguous incidents in Europe, with mysterious drones disrupting air traffic and unexplained explosions on critical infrastructure. But what if, one day, a drone were to cross into a European country and kill civilians? That would clearly be an act of war requiring a response, yet still fall short of the threshold for triggering NATO's Article 5, Pamment claims. According to him, such sub-threshold incidents—sabotage, cyberattacks and information manipulation—could continue for years.

Who Stands Behind FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference), and How Do They Operate?

Who is the actor behind FIMI? Anyone can be. "Normally, we talk about Russia, China, and Iran as the main countries that spread FIMI," claims Pamment. According to him, in Europe, China mainly seeks to shape how people perceive Beijing. At the same time, Iran, as a smaller regional power, focuses more on winning political support for its goals amid Middle Eastern conflicts.

Over the last decades, and especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has been the main FIMI actor in Europe, aiming to maintain a 'buffer zone' of states between itself and Western powers. Most of these countries, except Belarus, have moved closer to Europe, which Moscow sees as a threat and therefore targets in different ways.

Russia's key goal is to weaken support for Ukraine by undermining trust in governments, stirring up debates about Ukrainian refugees or distracting the public with other crises. This is further reinforced by hybrid pressure: airspace violations, drones, and small attacks. This makes people feel scared and insecure, shifting focus away from supporting Ukraine and making it harder to keep democracy functioning. But what is the best way to undermine democracy?

Imagine you are a contracted FIMI operator, whose task it is to flood the people who feel ignored, mistreated, or unsupported by their government with messages that reinforce exactly what they already believe. You take advantage of people's confirmation bias to create polarized groups. By constantly feeding each group a narrative that matches their fears and frustrations, you create disarray in society.

For example, if one group hates the white walls, you send them content saying white walls are a scandal, while those who hate black walls get messages insisting black walls are an outrageous choice. "The goal is not to win an argument about wall colour, but to increase conflict, deepen polarization, and ultimately make democracy function worse", Pamment explains.

To Point With the Whole Hand

In light of the challenges confronting Europe, one crucial question remains: who is responsible for protecting the truth? Pamment stresses that there is no single player who can be held solely accountable, arguing that governments, social media platforms, and civil society all need to share responsibility. "In Swedish, we say you have to 'point with your whole hand'; maybe we need to point with our whole hand at more of the players who are responsible for the information environment."

Who is responsible for protecting the truth? There is no accountable single player

Countermeasures for Governments

Pamment emphasises that the better governments understand threat actors, the easier it is to disrupt their operations or make them less effective. "Russia and China should feel that running these operations is not worth the cost, as there will be consequences for their actions", he claims. In most cases, however, they benefit from a distinct first-mover advantage. They can do something completely new, to which governments must respond, meaning they are always a bit behind.

The European Union Horizon Program is now funding a project called ADAC.io to help European Union governments and their member states' institutions to deal better with FIMI. As part of this, researchers like James Pamment are creating concrete tools, such as a 'Framework for Attribution of Information Influence Operations', which will be combined next year into the FIMI toolbox—a practical set of countermeasures EU member states can use against FIMI.
Pamment stresses that, unlike NATO, EU institutions cannot determine national security due to the Union's primarily economic foundation. "The extent [to which] they put FIMI toolbox into action is up to them, and there's only hope that they do."

Protecting Authenticity

With traditional media, it was clear who was responsible for what was published; technological developments have flooded us with information, and the quality of it has sharply declined. The big tech platforms that shape our information environment nowadays insist they are not publishers, even though they systematically amplify content.

Constantly evolving technology enables the production of disinformation, extreme opinions, and fear, accelerating polarization faster than we can ever track. Pamment points out that, as a consequence, disinformation, propaganda, fake accounts, AI-generated content, conspiracy theories, and pure spam, now drown out authentic voices and expert analysis. "The big challenge is not so much about checking everything wrong, but protecting what is real instead."

Aware Communities

Pamment argues that resilience starts with a well-informed public and trusted institutions.

Daniel Von Appen | Unsplash

People have to understand how the media works and critically evaluate sources in order to protect themselves.

Moreover, strong institutions and strategic communication limit the impact of false claims that hostile actors can exploit. "If we build resilience, there should be less polarization, fewer grievances that can lead to successful FIMI operations."
Pamment adds that everyday choices matter. Citizens should stay informed, rely on trustworthy sources, and share reliable information with others. "In the end, it is our communities that can become stronger."

"The big challenge is not so much about checking everything wrong, but protecting what is real instead"

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High North, High Stakes: NATO States Must Define the Arctic's Future

Annabel Lindmets | RSR | Opinion

The Arctic is heating up—literally and geopolitically. When repeatedly attempting to make a deal behind Ukraine's back, the ominous Trump-Putin duo has also increasingly turned its focus to the Arctic while sidelining other actors operating in the area. Less discussed is that the draft of the contentious US-Russia 28-point 'peace plan' for Ukraine includes a provision committing Washington and Moscow to long-term economic cooperation and joint development projects in the Arctic.

Such an arrangement would mark a sharp break from the cooperative frameworks that have governed the High North for decades. By pursuing bilateral projects in key areas—like energy extraction, infrastructure corridors, and critical-mineral development—the posed risk is the undercutting of the multilateral structures that Arctic nations have relied on for stability and transparency. Officials in Capitals of the Nordics have already voiced concern, warning that decisions affecting the Arctic region's future should not be made in exclusive back-room agreements, leaving other Arctic stakeholders on the sidelines.

A glance back at the Cold War, when the Arctic was heavily militarised, helps to clarify just how high the stakes have once again become. In fact, one of the most crucial moments shaping the modern Arctic was Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 Murmansk speech. Key proposals included the creation of a nuclear-free zone in northern Europe, cooperation on environmental protection, and enhanced collaboration on resource development and scientific research. The speech's significance lies in its enduring impact: it is widely credited with laying the groundwork for modern international cooperation in the Arctic and inspiring the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996.

The Arctic Council was thus established as a consensus-based forum to facilitate cooperation on environmental and scientific issues, explicitly avoiding political or military confrontation. Its greatest strength has always been inclusivity, as the eight Arctic states—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States—work alongside six Indigenous Permanent Participants, ensuring that local knowledge and cultural perspectives are fully integrated into the decision-making. That was until 2022. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the seven other Arctic states suspended collaboration with Russia. As a result, nearly half of the Arctic, which is under Russian jurisdiction, now lies outside the Council's decision-making framework. This has created significant gaps in environmental monitoring, scientific research, and emergency preparedness. As a consequence, the Council's effectiveness as a forum is now in question.

The Arctic now faces pressure from two fronts: on one side, the accelerating environmental crisis in one of the planet's most fragile and climate-sensitive regions; on the other, growing geopolitical competition that risks turning the High North into a stage for military posturing.

This reality forces other Arctic states and Europe to ask critical questions: what position should states take, and what do they have to offer in shaping the Arctic's future? It is increasingly clear that Europe will feel the consequences most acutely—both in terms of security on its northern flank and the sustainability challenges tied to a rapidly warming Arctic.

The aforementioned Arctic Council, which was originally established for scientific and environmental cooperation, is becoming more politicized due to changed conditions. This shift has generated frustration among many scientists, who stress the importance of separating politics from environmental and climate issues, particularly given that much of their research depends on access to Russian Arctic territory. At the same time, Russia's actions demonstrate no interest in such collaboration, while prioritising its own strategic and economic interests over collective environmental and security concerns. This is evident in its exploitation of resources in areas overlapping with other states' economic zones and its joint military exercises with China in the region.

To understand the High North, one must keep in mind—unfortunately—that almost everything there revolves around resources. Europe, committed to its values-based approach, recognises how shortsighted exploitation could undermine both sustainability and security in the region. It is often 'forgotten' that decisions regarding the Arctic must serve the Arctic, not just external agendas.

This recognition forces a pivotal shift for Europe and the like-minded Arctic states. They must respond to the proposed U.S.–Russia bilateral deal not merely with rhetoric, but with a coherent, alternative vision for Arctic governance and development. This vision must pivot on two strategic pillars: collective security and sustainable development, directly challenging the extractive, exclusionary nature of the proposed Trump-Putin arrangement.

This required coherent, alternative vision is not a utopian ideal, but a pragmatic response rooted in existing diplomatic and military realities, making the shift from a theoretical challenge to a practical policy stance immediately urgent. The foundation for this alternative is already significantly strengthened.

It is an illusion to see the non-Russian Arctic states as merely helpless actors facing overly powerful, exploitative giants. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO fundamentally redefined the security dimension for Europe, transforming the Arctic into a region where seven of the eight Arctic states now fall under the alliance's collective defense umbrella. NATO's role is now to leverage this geographic and military cohesion to significantly enhance collective deterrence against Russia's military build-up on the Kola Peninsula.

However, the Arctic cannot become a military playground. The goal is not confrontation, but establishing strategic stability—which requires that military strength is paired with diplomatic assertion.

By combining multilateral engagement with targeted initiatives in research, infrastructure, and emergency preparedness, Western countries can practically shape the Arctic's future. They possess the legitimacy, resources, and technical expertise necessary to prevent the region from being dictated by exclusive, resource-focused deals. Failing to act decisively risks ceding influence to Russia, allowing unilateral exploitation to become the norm, and critically weakening Europe's northern security flank. The Arctic is now the proving ground for the West's commitment to rules-based international order: strategic action, not mere reaction, is essential.

Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation | Arctic troops of the Russian Federation | Wikimedia Commons | Mil.ru | CC BY 4.0

The Consolidated North: How Finland and the NB8 Are Reshaping NATO's Strategy

Lisa Barut | UPF | Analysis

The war in Ukraine appears not to have deterred Russia. In fact, Norway has reported recent, significant military activities along the Kola Peninsula. The Kola Peninsula, Russia's strategic territory in the extreme northwest at the border with Norway and Finland, is the home of Russia's Northern Fleet and one of the largest arsenals of nuclear warheads in the world. This threat reminds us of the importance of the recent entrance of Finland and Sweden to NATO, extending its previous 195.7 km border with Russia in the North. Now, that frontier extends along a 1,340-kilometre line.

The Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8)—Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden—now form a seamless and coherent defensive arc, stretching from the High Arctic to the Baltic Sea. Moreover, seven out of eight of these countries are members of the European Union. The EU's recent update of its Arctic Policy, which for the first time brought attention to military security, resources, and transport routes alongside climate change, signals a new convergence of priorities. This has created an unprecedented alignment of political, economic, and military power in Northern Europe, significantly strengthening both NATO and the EU's deterrence stances.

At the heart of their collective defence approach, we can place Finland's comprehensive security mindset. It is worth mentioning that it is Finland's turn to hold the rotating chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Finland's Arctic identity construction began in the early 2000s, as it positioned itself as an EU advocate in Arctic affairs. This strategy leverages Finland's deep-seated expertise in Arctic operational experience, proximity to abundant natural resources, strategic access to emerging Arctic sea routes, advanced ice-breaking technology, and the rich cultural heritage of the Sami Indigenous People. These tangible assets are underpinned by a more profound national characteristic: a unique mindset of resilience and preparedness.

This Finnish mindset is rooted in collective memory, particularly the trauma of the Winter War of 1939 against the Soviet Union. As a comparatively weaker nation, Finland relied on knowledge of its terrain, camouflage skills, and enhanced cold-weather mobility and expertise. It ultimately lost 10% of its territory, and the war left deep internal wounds that forged a special mindset of constant readiness. To recover lost territories, Finland allied with Nazi Germany, a decision that subsequently endangered its sovereignty. However, by admitting this error and pledging neutrality, Finland secured its independence from the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the term 'Finlandisation' described this policy of Kremlin-friendly neutrality. To preserve its nominal independence and market economy, Finland ceded control over its foreign policy and could not enter the Euro-Atlantic community. However, it could be said that the recent events made the term obsolete. For Finland, the military is merely the most visible

layer of a deeper security concept—a 'total defence' doctrine forged by historical experience. This whole-of-society approach manifests in a nation fortified from within, with underground bunkers beneath cities, a vast network of shelters for 900,000 people, and citizens trained in emergency preparedness. During the Cold War, this culture of vigilance meant pursuing nominal non-alignment while diligently building military capabilities. Ultimately, Finland's true strength lies in this tightly woven web of civic commitment, shared responsibility, and collective resilience. This is the profound value it offers its allies—a critical template for an alliance grappling with the blurred lines between war and peace.

The consolidation of the alliances of the NB8 not only brought a 'total defence' mindset to the table, but has also accelerated operational integration, reinforcing existing forums and cooperations like NORDEFCO (The Nordic Defence Cooperation), and at the same time, the control of key chokepoints. NORDEFCO—which had its first revision of the Memorandum of Understanding—has become borderless, with a new possibility of sharing intelligence and operational plans that were difficult to do before due to national data classifications.

This is the profound value it offers its allies—a critical template for an alliance grappling with the blurred lines between war and peace

Concerning the key chokepoints, two are worth mentioning: the Suwalki Gap and the Gotland Island. The first is a strategic 65-kilometre stretch linking Poland and the Baltic states. Lithuania has already begun upgrading the Via Baltica highway for dual civilian-military use and is planning a Lazdijai-Alytus-Vilnius corridor to improve access to this strategic corridor. The Swedish island of Gotland is strategically essential for controlling the Baltic Sea, and there exists a risk of Russia attacking it to protect its own naval forces. Recent Polish-Swedish exercises have focused on fortifying the island precisely to deny Russia such a potential staging ground and to secure vital NATO sea lanes.

Estonian Foreign Ministry | Nordic-Baltic cooperation format, NB8 members, talked about Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus in Gotland, Sweden on 10 April 2024 | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 2.0

Moreover, Finland's strategic model is being institutionalised and exported directly through new, integrated NATO forces. The Alliance has established its 'Multi-Corps Land Component Command Northwest' in the Finnish city of Mikkeli, a headquarters designed to orchestrate large-scale operations across the entire region. This command structure is being supported by tangible infrastructure developments, with Finland greenlighting a multi-billion-euro NATO rail link to an Arctic port enabling the swift transport of heavy armour from allied arsenals. Furthermore, at the beginning of 2026, Finland will host a NATO Forward Land Forces (FLF) brigade in Finnish Lapland, and this deployment will be anchored by Sweden's specialised Norrbotten Brigade trained for sub-Arctic warfare. Through this brigade, allied troops will be immersed in and adopt Finnish operational methods, effectively exporting the nation's model of Arctic-ready, resilient defence directly into the core of NATO's posture.

Concerning the key chokepoints, two are worth mentioning: the Suwalki Gap and the Gotland Island


Jaanus Jagomägi | Unsplash

In summary, Finland's strength on the global stage derives from its consistent political messaging and its pragmatic defence planning. A pivotal example of this is its successful management of the relationship with Turkey—the very nation that initially placed a veto on Finland's NATO accession—by deepening trade, investment and defence ties. Turkey's role in this dynamic cannot be overlooked. Despite international concern over its domestic policies, its geopolitical significance is undeniable. In fact, Turkey is indispensable in Europe's security architecture due to its formidable military gatekeeping of the Black Sea, and strategic involvement in conflicts from Ukraine to Gaza. Therefore, Finland's success lies in its ability to manage relationships with indispensable, yet complex allies, like Turkey. And, once again, Turkey demonstrates a strategic imperative to assert its influence and secure a seat at the table in virtually every geopolitical theatre.

While this new paradigm empowers Arctic states to redefine their relations with Moscow and their roles in the region, the balance remains delicate. This requires meticulous coordination between complex multinational structures and numerous troops, all while navigating national sensitivities and avoiding costly redundancies. In other words, the strength of this new coordination lies in its nuanced approach: it addresses broad challenges with targeted actions, carefully tailored to the specific strategic context and national capabilities of each member state.

While this new paradigm empowers Arctic states to redefine their relations with Moscow and their roles in the region, the balance remains delicate

Annabel Lindmets | RSR in front of The Knotted Gun sculpture in Malmö | RSR photo archive

A Fly on the Wall: a Reflection on the RSR Trip to Lund

Jaana Sommermann | RSR | Feature

If you could be a fly on the wall, where would you want to go and what would you like to see? I know exactly where I would want to go, because I was already there. Before dawn, clinging to the cold metal rail of a bus in Tartu, watching a group of 20 sleepy travellers gather with suitcases and coffees clutched like lifelines. It was 6 in the morning, but they boarded the bus with a quiet excitement humming beneath their yawns.

At the Tallinn airport, the sharp light and even sharper goodbyes to forgotten items being confiscated at security passed in a blur. On the flight to Copenhagen, I found a comfortable spot above the overfilled luggage compartment and listened as they speculated about the Estonian Embassy in Denmark. Copenhagen welcomed them warmly and I trailed above their heads as they wandered the streets with an unhurried curiosity, taking in the architecture, the waterways, the people. I followed closely, landing now and then on a scarf or sleeve as they discussed the Danish royal guards and the altarpieces of a nearby church. The journey to Lund, however, nearly unravelled.

At the metro station, I perched on a flickering light fixture as confusion spread among the travellers: delays, technical issues, an announcement in Danish they could not quite decipher. The train they needed seemed impossibly far out of reach. For a moment I wondered whether I would be forced to watch them accept defeat on a dreary platform, just one stop away from their destination. But then luck, an unpredictable friend, offered a hand. The metro lurched back to life.

"I don't have anywhere to hold on to, but I'm not afraid of falling as there is physically no room to fall", one of them said as countless relieved passengers squeezed inside. With hurried steps and a touch of disbelief, the Estonians managed to board their train just in time, carrying with them equal parts relief and triumph.

In Lund, warmth and a smiling Swedish girl awaited them. I circled above their welcoming dinner. Someone expressed concern over a dish described as karljohan with cream, imagining it to be an inside joke about an unfortunate man named Karl Johan. Their laughter filled the room when they discovered it was simply the name of a mushroom. Humans are at their best when they bond over shared laughter, I've learned.

The next day brought them to Malmö. I followed them through museum halls, landing quietly on display cases and listening to their reactions when one of them managed to pull a bag equal to one horsepower. Afterwards they wandered the city in small groups, visiting places they had always wanted to see.

"Never again! Never will I step foot in this place again", one of them joked outside a shop, covered in the store's merchandise from head to toe.

By the evening, they returned to Lund for a lecture in the Lund University's main building. Even I paused, briefly awed, when we entered. Chandeliers glowed above polished floors and the air held a solemnity the travellers had not anticipated. Their surprise was sweet—now the request for business attire made perfect sense.

The days continued with a steady rhythm. They explored Lund's streets and quiet corners, getting to know the city with the same gentle attentiveness they offered during their lectures and mingles with UPF members. At the Swedish-Estonian House, I rested on the edge of a table while they listened to stories of Swedish Estonians and their community.

Time seemed to slip by unnoticed. A documentary night. A friendly debate. Long walks around the city. And suddenly everything was coming to an end. A city they had finally learned to navigate by heart was now about to be left behind. The final evening unfolded over a pizza party. A far less formal setting than chandeliers and business attire, but perhaps more heartfelt. From the broken clothes rack behind them, I watched friendships knit themselves into something sturdy and genuine. They spoke freely now, laughing at cultural differences, discussing recent events, planning futures not just as visitors but as companions.

When they said their goodbyes, there was a subtle heaviness in the air, the kind that accompanies endings that do not feel final. They spoke of Tartu, of meeting again, of how these few days had carved out something meaningful. Something worthy of carrying home.

As they prepared to leave Lund at yet another ungodly morning hour, I remained behind, settling once more on a quiet windowsill. Humans never realise how observable their bonds are, how visible the shift from strangers to friends becomes. But I saw it in the softening of their voices, the way their laughter found new harmony. A fly sees many things, but rarely something as beautiful as this.

Annabel Lindmets | RSR in front of the Royal House of Denmark | RSR photo archive

Civil Defence and Leaflets: 'In Case of Crisis or War'

Liisbet Reinsalu | RSR | Reflection

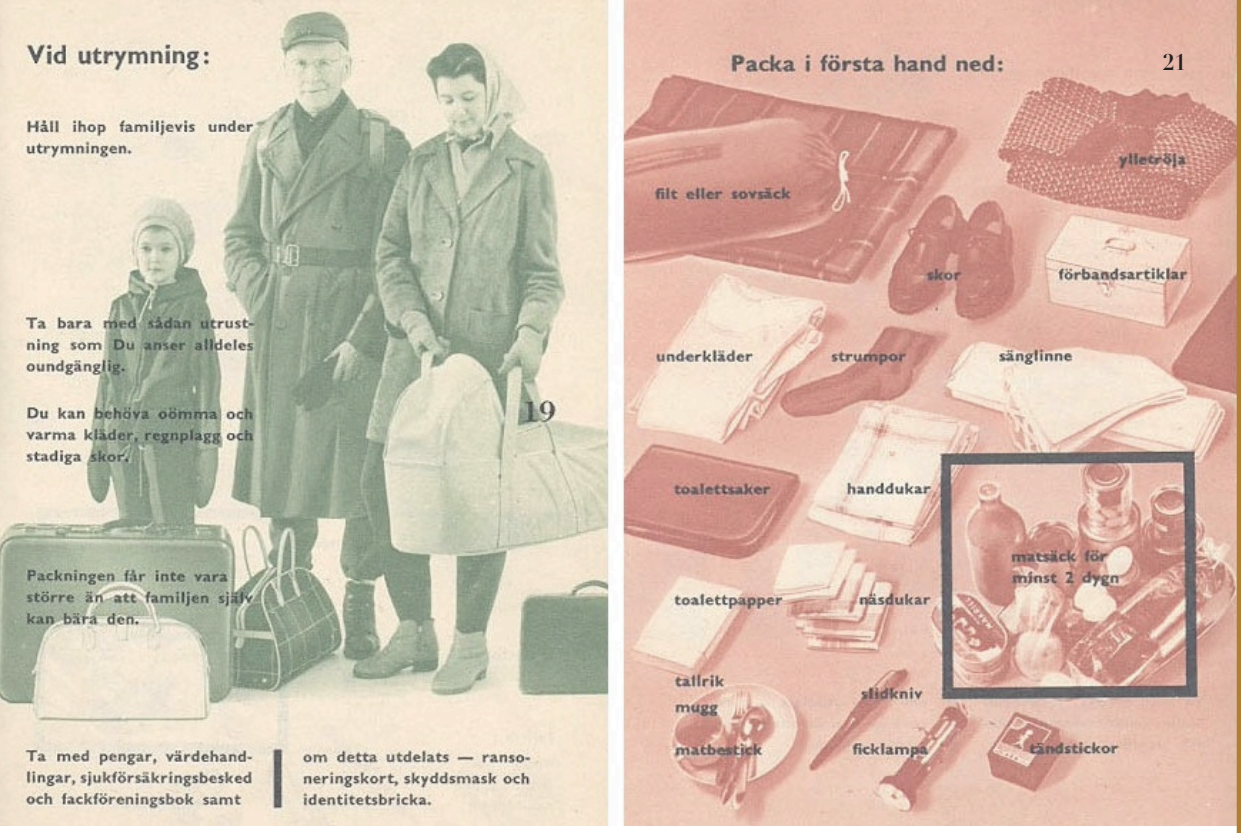
As part of the Erasmus Nordic-Baltic Youth Knowledge Exchange, members of UPF and RSR attended a lecture by Dr. Jana Wrange titled 'Civil Defence (Re)Emerged: A Multi-Level Perspective on Policy Developments in Post-Crimea Europe', based on her doctoral dissertation at Lund University.

Dr. Wrange's presentation focused on the evolution of civil defence in Sweden, as well as in other countries in the Nordic-Baltic region, explaining how the concept of total defence, a broader idea of defence which combines both military and civilian structures, has re-emerged since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014—and even more after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Civil defence, as we intend it today, is different from the Cold War time understanding of it. In fact, it is not just a crisis-management plan—it is about the readiness and ability of the whole society to resist threats and cooperate. Furthermore, according to Dr. Wrange's doctoral dissertation: "What is more, it is no longer an exclusively national matter, as states are linked by transnational threats as well as institutional commitments, calling for collective efforts to tackle the demands of contemporary security. Yet, without a common understanding, policymakers and practitioners alike are unable to consider and implement appropriate responses. Therefore, it is imperative to deepen our understanding of civil defence in various institutional contexts."

A key part of this new civil defence policy is strengthening society's resilience. The importance of resilience is also rooted in NATO's Article 3, which obliges member states "to maintain and develop both their individual, as well as collective capacity to resist armed attack". One way in which both Sweden and Estonia have been informing their residents about what to do in case of crisis or war is through distributing brochures containing practical information: from how their countries will act, how and through which channels will people be informed and notified, and how to respond to different types of threats. Both countries are certain that prevention, preparedness and timely notification and early action are vital. Every member of society needs to be aware and prepared.

Personally, I was surprised to learn that Sweden has a long history of distributing such brochures. This practice started in 1943, continued during the Cold War, and restarted after the annexation of Crimea. Each leaflet has been a compass of its time and composed with current threats in mind. After the shifts in the security environment and the coming of new kinds of threats, Sweden reassessed its security approach to total defence. For example, as part of its civil defence, Sweden re-established the position of Minister for Civil Defence and has been gradually increasing the country's civil defence budget. The most recent brochures produced by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, commissioned by the Swedish Government, are also part of this broader shift: the 2024 pamphlet includes clear explanations of Sweden's total defence concept, as well as sections about psychological defence and digital security. Moreover, the material seeks to inform residents how to contribute to collective resilience, and how to fight against propaganda and mis-and disinformation, all to explain how individuals fit in first person into the total defence structure—what their role and responsibility is.



Kungliga Inrikesdepartementet | Two pages from "Om kriget kommer" citizen guidance booklet | Wikimedia Commons |Public Domain (Sweden)

Estonia has distributed similar leaflets to its residents. However, the Estonian pamphlets have more of an all-hazard approach, providing recommendations on how to successfully cope in case of a crisis. Unlike Sweden, there is no special emphasis on the event of a war. The latest brochure — 'Hazard notification'—distributed by the Estonian Rescue Board in 2024, contained the same key information as Sweden's brochures: hazard notification procedures, warning sirens, sheltering, evacuation, an emergency supply checklist, and important phone numbers and websites.

Both countries have made significant efforts to build and strengthen civil defence, inform their residents and enhance societal resilience —from hazard notification tests and crisis-information apps, to real preparedness exercises and to the distribution of household leaflets. Regarding the use of brochures, Sweden has taken a more detailed and threat-specific approach, offering instructions on what to do in the event of a military threat or other major threats.

On the other hand, Estonia has focused more on broader all-hazards-general-crisis-preparedness. Of course, such leaflets are only one part of a country's crisis preparedness strategy—but nonetheless an important one. Being prepared and informed is our shared responsibility. Be aware, educate yourself and those around you, and make sure to look over your country's instructions on how to act in case of a crisis.

Liisbet Reinsalu | Members of UPF and RSR with Dr. Jana Wrange | RSR photo archive

"It is imperative to deepen our understanding of civil defence in various institutional contexts"

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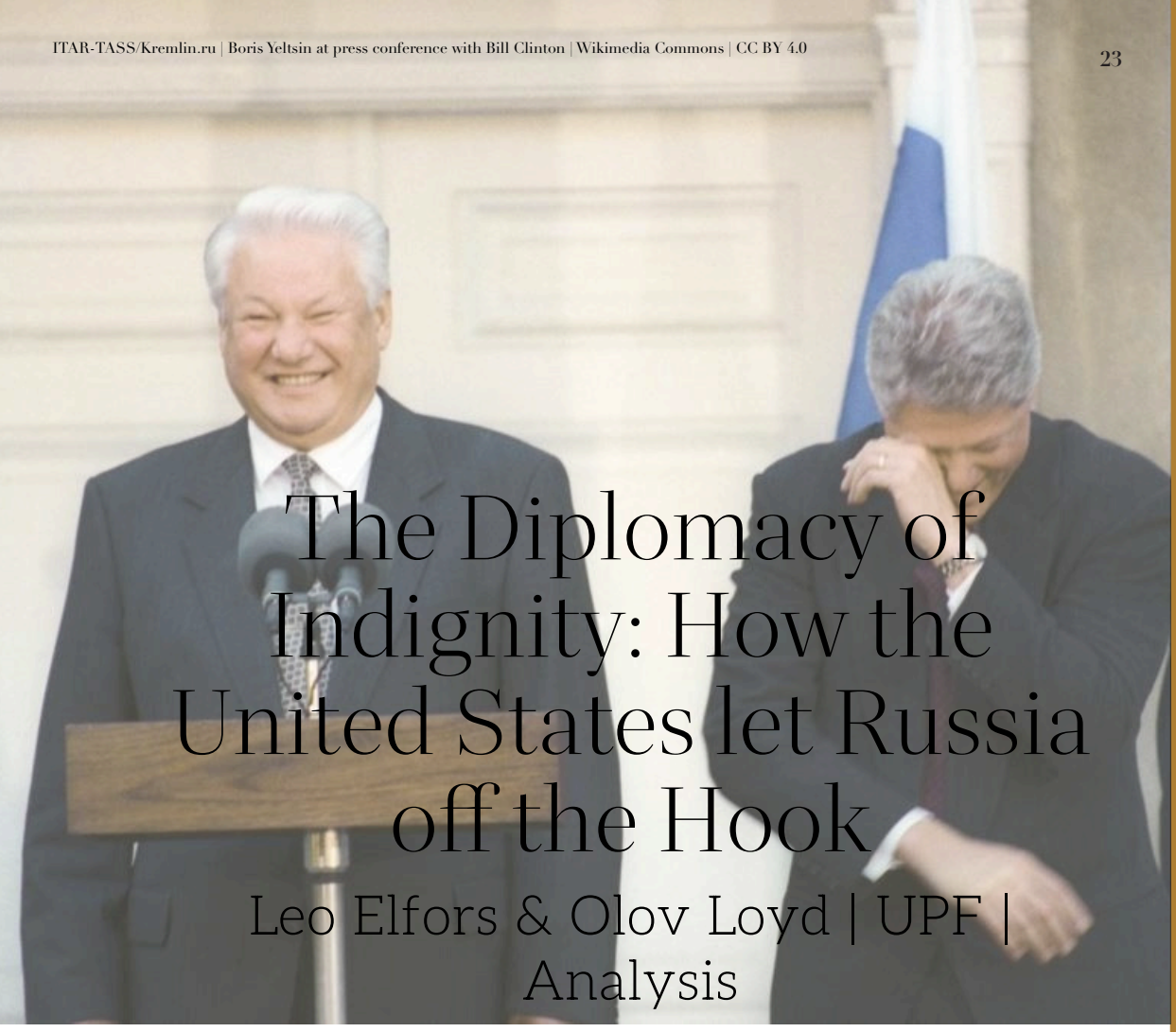


ITAR-TASS/Kremlin.ru | Boris Yeltsin at press conference with Bill Clinton | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY 4.0

The Diplomacy of Indignity: How the United States let Russia off the Hook

Leo Elfors & Olov Loyd | UPF | Analysis

When analysing the full scale invasion of Ukraine of 2022, many have discussed which actors are to blame and what served as the catalyst. This article delves into the history leading up to the invasion and examines the decisions of US leadership from the fall of the Soviet Union to the Maidan Revolution—also known as the Revolution of Dignity—and the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014. Can a common theme be identified in the decisions of these varying US administrations? And how might these decisions have influenced Russia?

Ukraine was in a difficult position following the collapse of the Soviet Union, with concerns of how the young country would position itself in its new geopolitical reality. Initially, the US was not enthusiastic about Ukrainian independence. President Bush viewed the Soviet Union as an important partner and did not want to lose it, risking the instability that post-Soviet nationalism would bring. However, Ukraine was out of his control.

The Soviet states gradually declared independence, with the Ukrainian parliament doing so on August 24, 1991.

Ukraine was not powerful or prosperous following the Soviet collapse. They had one of the lowest GDPs per capita of the former Soviet republics. The country was plagued by hyperinflation and the budget deficit stood at a staggering 14.4% of GDP. The Ukrainians urgently needed allies and support.They used the Russians' and Americans' concern about Ukraine possessing the third largest nuclear weapons arsenal in the world as a bargaining chip—resulting in the signature of the Trilateral Statement and the Budapest Memorandum in 1994, in which Ukraine agreed to give up their nuclear arsenal in exchange for becoming the third-largest recipient of US foreign aid. The agreements also included security guarantees from the Russian Federation, the United States, and the United Kingdom regarding Ukraine's territorial sovereignty.

However, the agreement garnered controversy within Ukraine, with many wondering if the guarantees were anything more than words on a piece of paper.

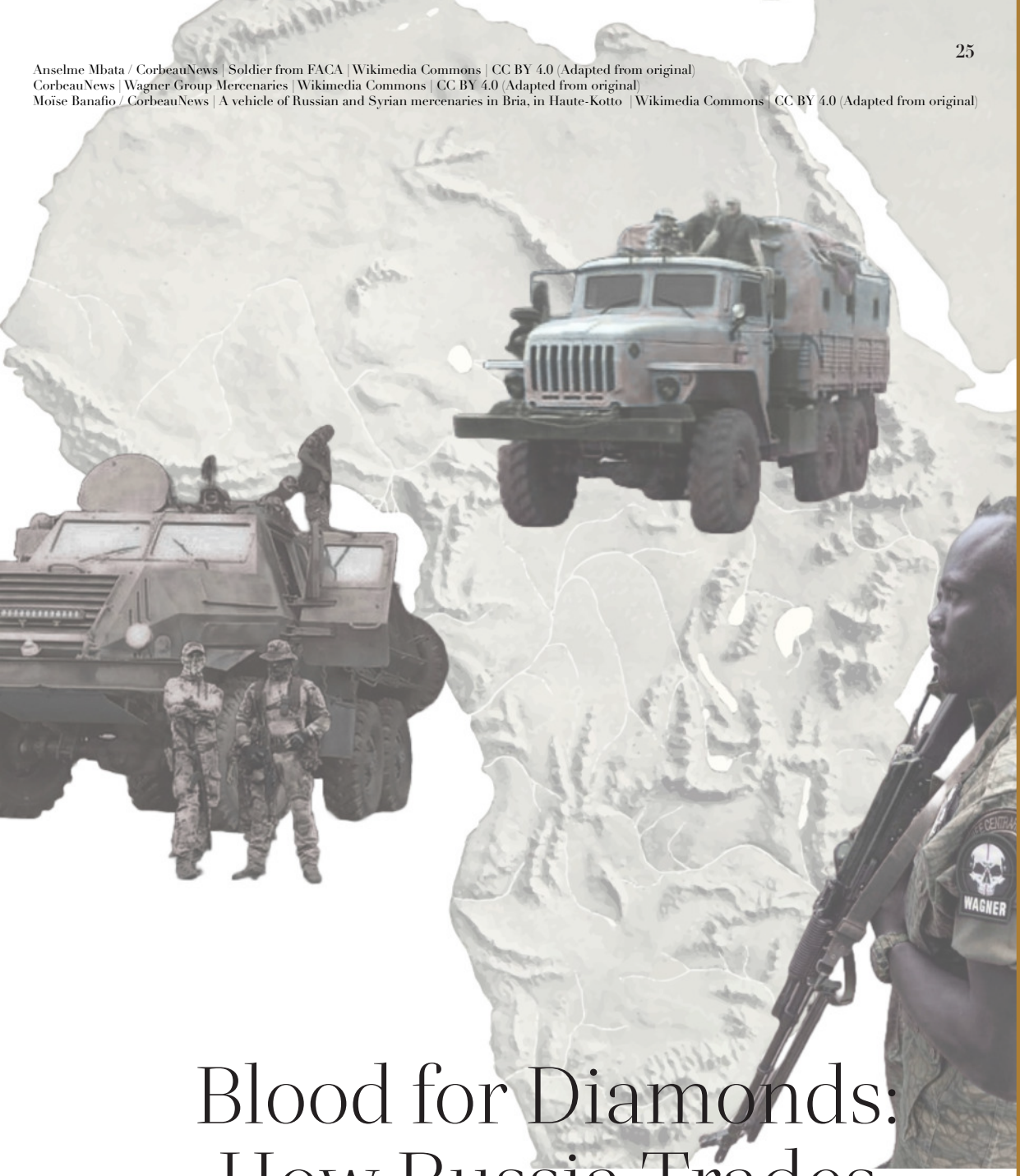
The first real test of how the US would act in relation to the post-Soviet sphere occurred in 2008 when Russian forces invaded Georgia. The Bush administration's response was one of condemnation in combination with some measures to curtail Russia, including partially cancelling diplomatic relations. The option of military intervention was rejected, however, with the US opting for supplying humanitarian aid to the Georgians. This relatively muted reaction to the invasion was likely due to a majority of national security officials viewing the invasion as an isolated incident—a mere speed bump in the ongoing process of strengthening US-Russia relations. This hope remained with the subsequent Obama administration. They predicted that a new era of leadership under incoming Russian President Dmitry Medvedev would abandon military aggression as a strategy of geopolitical conduct—but the hope died with the appointment of President Putin in 2012.

The agreement garnered controversy within Ukraine, with many wondering if the guarantees were anything more than words on a piece of paper

In 2014, war broke out in Eastern Ukraine—a Russian-influenced response to the Euromaidan protests and the ensuing revolution that resulted in the removal of the pro-Russia Yanukovych government in Ukraine. The military aggression against Georgia proved not to be an isolated incident. This time the United States imposed sanctions on Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea. Sending ground troops was never considered due to Russia's status as a nuclear power, and even sending arms to Ukraine was dismissed by the Obama administration as a dangerous escalation. While the sanctions might have negatively affected Russian GDP growth in the short term, a retrospective analysis indicates a limited impact of the sanctions in changing the Kremlin's long-term geopolitical ambitions. The absence of a stronger response, such as weapons deliveries, was construed by President Putin as an indication that the US would not be capable of coordinating an effective response to further Russian encroachment. Hence, the story of 2008 repeated itself in 2014.

Ultimately, it cannot be known what would have happened if US leaders took a different course of action. There is a possibility—perhaps it is even likely—that President Putin was determined to invade Ukraine and that the end result would have been the same regardless of US actions. However, what is clear is that US leaders decided to take—or not to take—certain actions in order to demonstrate that they posed no threat to Russia. Additionally, US Presidents turned a blind eye to the glaring threat that Putin's Russia posed to its post-Soviet neighbours—even after Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. When Russia annexed Crimea and it became apparent that they would not back down, the Obama administration still acted cautiously. This history of inaction does not exempt President Putin from responsibility for starting the war with Ukraine, but the naïveté and lack of conviction that the United States exhibited in their responses aided his foreign policy ventures.

VO Svoboda | Euromaidan protest in Kyiv, 19 February 2014 | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 3.0



Blood for Diamonds: How Russia Trades Militias for Minerals

Erik Norinder | UPF | Analysis

Russia's engagement across the African continent has seen a substantial resurgence over the past decade, primarily facilitated through the calculated deployment of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) like the now-rebranded Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps. This operational model, often described as a 'resource-for-security' exchange, is central to Moscow's strategy of reasserting itself as a major global power and directly countering established Western influence in vulnerable nations.

The fundamental reason behind Russia's reliance on PMCs stems from their multifaceted utility as flexible instruments of state policy. Crucially, PMCs afford the Kremlin a crucial layer of plausible deniability when conducting politically sensitive operations abroad, distancing the government from direct responsibility for actions that often skirt or outright violate international humanitarian law. While PMCs are technically illegal under Russian law, their operations, which sometimes take on tasks typically reserved for regular forces, are tacitly endorsed or selectively ignored by law enforcement agencies within Russia. This ambiguous legal status creates a loophole that Moscow exploits to advance its objectives globally and chip away at the US-led international order without confronting major powers directly. The use of these forces is also considered low-cost and low-risk compared to committing conventional military troops, especially considering the political cost of casualties from regular forces. Beyond deniability, the motivations are deeply strategic: Moscow seeks to displace Western influence, secure crucial votes in international bodies like the UN General Assembly, and cement a global sphere of influence.

In exchange for military support, PMCs secure economic leverage, primarily through accessing Africa's abundant natural resources. This resource-security exchange framework is characterised by PMCs providing "regime survival packages" to unstable governments or military juntas, who, lacking legitimacy or popular support, are receptive to partners offering swift, unconditional security without the moral guardrails attached to Western aid, such as demands for adherence to human rights or democratic governance. The services rendered by Russian PMCs are expansive, including providing protective details for senior local officials, fighting alongside local forces in active combat, training host-nation security forces, and conducting sophisticated disinformation and propaganda campaigns designed to discredit Western actors and bolster pro-Kremlin narratives.

PMCs afford the Kremlin a crucial layer of plausible deniability when conducting politically sensitive operations abroad, distancing the government from direct responsibility for actions that often skirt or outright violate international humanitarian law

The Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan serve as prime examples of this lucrative trade. In CAR, the Africa Corps has been indispensable since 2018, providing security for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and training the national army. In return, Wagner and its affiliated companies, such as Lobaye Invest and Midas Resources, secured extensive economic concessions, including control over lucrative gold, diamond, and timber extraction operations. Wagner effectively carved out its own economic projects, relying on a barter system of 'security for resources' that does not drain the host nation's cash treasury, though it comes at a significant long-term economic cost for the CAR. Similarly, in Sudan, the Africa Corps deployed personnel to provide military training and support, orchestrate disinformation operations, and protect gold mining concessions for Russian companies tied to its network, such as 'Meroe Gold' and 'M-Invest'. Sudan is particularly strategic as it provides access to the gold trade, which helps Russia bypass the economic sanctions imposed following the invasion of Ukraine. Estimates suggest Russia has extracted billions of dollars in gold from Africa since 2022, providing off-the-books funding for Moscow's wider foreign ventures or war efforts.

The mechanics of this extraction often necessitate PMCs integrating into the global financial and logistical systems, relying on networks of shell companies and local intermediaries to mask the connection between security operations and commercial endeavours. Wagner-affiliated mining companies often require essential supplies and equipment, which necessitates movements of funds —albeit often unwittingly—through international financial institutions and global shipping lines like Maersk and CMA CGM, despite sanctions. This deliberate opacity ensures plausible deniability while enabling resource exploitation.

Following the death of financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023, the Kremlin has initiated a significant restructuring, moving to absorb Wagner's operations under the umbrella of the state-controlled Africa Corps. This transition, already seen in Mali and expanding into Burkina Faso and Niger, signals Moscow's desire to eliminate the mercenary group's autonomy, centralise command under the Ministry of Defence, and formalise its presence with state-to-state agreements. While the tactical methods and personnel (many ex-Wagner fighters) remain similar, Moscow is now pushing for cash payments for security services to fund its war effort and mitigate sanctions, rather than relying solely on resource barter. This new phase institutionalises Russia's military-commercial approach, ensuring that resource revenue flows to Kremlin-loyal oligarchs or state coffers, leveraging military might to secure economic assets (ports, mines, oil fields), and ultimately using these economic footholds to enable military logistics.

Russia's strategy is opportunistic, exploiting instability and the vacuum left by retreating Western forces, particularly those of France, to position itself as a reliable security patron. The PMCs, now operating under state direction, are a crucial element in Moscow's long-term play to solidify a durable sphere of influence across West and Central Africa, where access to strategic minerals such as gold, diamonds, and critical raw materials (CRMs) serves as both payment and a source of geopolitical leverage against Western interests. This convergence of state military objectives and resource acquisition epitomises a return to Cold War-era transactional politics, where CRMs have become a "new currency of power" in a multipolar world.

This method operates much like a bespoke security subscription service offered by a shadowy conglomerate: African leaders pay their retainer not with hard currency, but by handing over the keys to the vaults—their natural resources—in exchange for protection from immediate internal threats, allowing Russia to fund its global operations and solidify its strategic foothold with minimal financial outlay.

Amisom Photo | Flickr | CC0 1.0

Sustainable War: The Vicious Cycle of Militarism and Environmental Degradation

Emmie Eklund | UPF | Analysis

In conversations about conflict and war, attention is usually concentrated on humanitarian suffering—rightfully so. But another important factor is forgotten: the destruction of nature, biodiversity, and our common climate, detrimental to present and future generations alike. Wars drive climate change and environmental degradation, leading in turn to increased instability and new conflicts. No conversation about militarism, security, and peace is thus complete without an environmental perspective—and vice versa.

In 2024, 92 states—nearly half of the world—were involved in active military engagements, with 56 conflicts taking place around the globe. A 2019 study estimated that up to 20% of global conflicts in the past century were caused or exacerbated by climate change, as conflicts arose from competition over vital resources such as water, food, and arable land. With rising temperatures and more frequent extreme weather events, the impact of environmental drivers on instability is set to increase drastically. On top of increased instability,

conflict-ridden countries and regions are the least prepared to adapt to and handle climate shocks, feeding further vulnerability.

Furthermore, the environmental cost of armed conflicts is huge. Every stage of war—from preparation and production to combat and reconstruction—not only leaves massive carbon footprints, but also degrades the natural world. The military-industrial complex pollutes and destroys through the extraction of materials and the production of ammunition, weapons, and vehicles. Fossil-fuelled jets, tanks, and ships generate unfathomable levels of greenhouse gas emissions during practice drills, skirmishes, and conflicts—causing even further destruction. The reconstruction of areas destroyed by military engagement adds vast amounts of emissions and costs to the war's tab.

Since war is such a dirty undertaking, the world's militaries contribute to emissions and environmental degradation on an enormous scale. Although military spending accounts for around 2.5% of global GDP, militaries around the world are responsible for almost 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions—similar to the aviation and shipping industries combined. The militaries' greenhouse gas emissions alone are enough to warm the planet to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels—the boundary aimed for under the Paris Agreement. Furthermore, €1 spent on the military pollutes around three times as much as €1 spent elsewhere—making it one of the most detrimental and least regulated sectors in terms of climate impact.

UX Gun | Unsplash

The lack of regulation takes many forms. While briefly mentioned in international climate law, military emissions and environmental impact remain largely invisible. Both emissions and impact are exempt from reporting obligations of the climate treaties and consistently absent in climate negotiations. As such, military operations cause destruction on an unknown scale. Israeli airstrikes in Gaza during the first 10 months of the ongoing genocide have generated over 40 million tonnes of debris, containing toxins such as asbestos as well as human remains. This debris is estimated to take more than 15 years to clear and will contaminate Gaza's soil and groundwater for decades. Similarly, 700 oilfields in Kuwait were deliberately set ablaze during the Gulf War in 1991, resulting in smoke spreading extensively and 11 million barrels of crude oil spilling into the Persian Gulf. Nearly 300 oil lakes were formed on the surface of the desert, and 90% of the contaminated soil is still exposed today.

In addition to this direct destruction, military activities cause environmental destruction as a byproduct of their actions. Wildfires sparked by armed activities, for example, release greenhouse gases, soot and other pollutants into the air, while devastating biodiversity and ecosystems. This kind of indirect environmental impact—including deforestation, pollution, and the depletion of vital resources—is additional to the estimated share of global emissions, and leads to long-term environmental degradation impacting both ecosystems and human livelihoods. The greenhouse gases released by today's wars will remain in the atmosphere for more than 100 years, ensuring damage for generations to come.

The greenhouse gases released by today's wars will remain in the atmosphere for more than 100 years, ensuring damage for generations to come

Still, increasing military spending is high on the political agenda, not least for European states. Global military spending amounted to over €2.3 trillion in 2024—with the US accounting for almost 40%, and with states in the Global North allocating 30 times more resources to military objectives than to environmental issues. NATO members have pledged to increase their military budgets to 5% of their GDP, which could cause up to €258 billion worth of climate damage annually. If this trend continues, it sets global military spending at €5.7 trillion by 2035, with increased emissions and degradation from the military-industrial complex to follow.

The humanitarian suffering due to conflicts and the changing environment is expanding. The leading cause of forced displacement today is conflict, soon to be overtaken by disasters, extreme weather, and environmental degradation. While the big emitters and environmental degraders in the Global North refuse to help and welcome those in need, they continue to deepen the crisis by increasing military operations and decreasing efforts to combat climate change, forcing the rest of the world into a negative spiral they did not ask for.

The vast majority of refugees and internally displaced persons originate from—and are hosted in—low-emission countries whose environments have been ravaged by armed conflict, their populations facing compounding issues of social vulnerability, lack of vital resources, climate change, and instability.

By 2050, rapid climate change and escalating climate threats alone—disregarding conflicts and mass violence—are projected to displace up to 2.1 billion people, roughly 25% of the global population. As Kumi Naidoo, President of the Fossil Fuel Treaty Initiative, emphasised at COP30: "It is not about the planet—the planet does not need saving. [...] At the end of it, we will be gone. The planet will still be here." Whether war or the environment—or a combination of both—will put an end to our time on Earth is up to us. On our current trajectory, however, an end due to these factors seems both likely and impending.

The vicious cycle is such: wars accelerate climate change, and climate change fuels the conditions for future wars. Thus, addressing the climate crisis as well as security concerns requires recognising and overhauling the various structures that sustain our reliance on fossil fuels, and that perpetuate a negative spiral of violence, environmental degradation, and vulnerability. Still, this connection is kept hidden from the general public by our political representatives and world leaders, as they push to increase funding to this cycle of doom. Eloquently summarised by The War on Climate: "Breaking that cycle isn't just urgent, it's essential for protecting ecosystems, safeguarding vulnerable communities, and securing the future. Peace, now more than ever, is a climate imperative."

Salah Darwish | A flooded refugee camp | Unsplash

Europe's Forests or Romania's Theft? How Corruption and Timber Mafias Undermine Trust in the EU

Ilinca Artene | UPF | Opinion

On the evening of 31st December 2006 and the early morning of 1st January 2007, Romanians were not just celebrating the New Year, they were also celebrating membership in the European Union, raising both flags in an emotional display. Now, only 18 years and over €100.65 billion later (of which Romania contributed €32.87 billion, receiving €67.78 billion), AUR—Romania's eurosceptic far-right party—would score 40% if elections were held tomorrow. Along the Russian border, propaganda and misjudged narratives have been affecting Eastern Europe, undermining populations' belief in both EU institutions and the benefits of EU membership. Beyond the obvious trend of Russian 'misfires' in multiple countries (Romania, Poland, and recently Denmark), the threat lies less in hybrid warfare or military attacks, and more so in weakening the European community from within, eroding trust and commitment.

But why? What drives people to distrust something that, objectively, works very well? What arguments do they actually use?

One of the most common arguments used in Romania is, in essence, partially true: someone is stealing our forests, exploiting the virgin woodlands without permission and destroying fragile ecosystems.

But, despite popular claims, the wrongdoers are not Ursula von der Leyen or Macron. Romanian forests are taken by corrupt Romanian politicians and a dangerous, complex wood mafia that serves both private European firms and local businessmen. Deforestation is not the price that Romania paid for being in the EU, but rather the price it continues to pay ever since 1989 for continuing to allow elected officials—former members of the Romanian Communist Party or their progeny—and their close circle to defy the law and abuse the power the Romanian people entrusted them with.

Romania's forests cover 29% of its territory, slightly over 7 million hectares. Of this, Romsilva, the state company, manages around 4.2 million hectares, roughly 60% of all forests. The remaining 40% is divided among private investors—some international, many local—including municipal administrations. The 2000 Forest Restitution Law, intended to return land to historical owners, was applied chaotically and often corruptly, enabling local officials and businessmen to seize valuable forest land. Over 400,000 hectares, worth more than €4 billion, remain contested in court. Fraudulent restitutions transferred vast areas out of public ownership with little state accountability, reflecting long-standing institutional complicity.

Among private investors, Ingka Investments,

a Swedish company supplying IKEA, controls 50,000 hectares. Romania is one of IKEA's top suppliers globally, alongside the U.S. and Latvia. Investigations and environmental reports reveal that some of Romania's last virgin and centuries-old forests are being legally harvested and transformed into IKEA furniture—chairs, cribs, armchairs—by several Romanian suppliers identified by Greenpeace. Although these companies admit to producing for IKEA, they insist all operations follow Romanian law, which does not classify many ancient forests as protected. IKEA states that all suppliers must use recycled or FSC-certified wood, yet this certification still permits logging in old-growth forests that Romanian authorities fail to shield.

In Romania, someone is stealing our forests, exploiting the virgin woodlands without permission and destroying fragile ecosystems

The system works simply but deceptively: a silviculture expert is supposed to mark trees suitable for cutting—old, broken, or ill trees—before they are sold at auction. Instead, the expert waits until after the auction, negotiates a sum with the supplier, and marks other trees within that value, often choosing healthy, valuable trees rather than old or broken ones. Transport usually has a permit and is, in theory, legal, but the declared quantity and type of wood rarely match what is actually in the trucks. Most suppliers do not deliver timber directly from commercial forests to sawmills. Instead, wood is first taken to storage yards, where legally and illegally felled timber is mixed before being certified as 'clean' and sent to private investors. Surplus or unnecessary wood is transformed into firewood and sold on the Romanian market at exorbitant prices.

The private investor receives cheaper, higher-quality timber while paying suppliers more. The partnership between international investors and politically connected local businessmen is often protected by Romania's most powerful parties and represents a win-win for both sides. However, this happens at the cost of Romania's forests, ecosystems that thousands of species depend on, and the trust of Romanian citizens. Observers see their forests being sold to international companies without realising a critical point: they are not stolen by foreigners, but sold by local, money-driven actors.

Decades of weak legislation and poor enforcement have led to the destruction of millions of hectares of forest, leaving once-wooded mountainsides barren. Traditional forestry knowledge has vanished, forest rangers have disappeared, and wildlife habitats have collapsed. Only a handful of major offenders have ever faced justice; even the most notorious restitution case, implicating Paltin Sturdza and former politician Viorel Hrebenciuc, ended in 2023 with all charges dismissed due to the statute of limitations.

Liviu Florescu | Unsplash

Dahn | Logging in the Mehedinți Mountains, Romania | Wikimedia Commons | CC0 1.0

Since the adoption of the Forest Law at the end of 2024, the Romanian Environment Ministry has promised reforms. The proposals include updates to the SUMAL monitoring system, satellite-based surveillance, and stricter oversight. Official statistics claim 18 million cubic meters of wood are harvested each year legally, yet experts estimate an equal volume is cut illegally.

Meanwhile, trust in both European and local institutions continues to decline. Many citizens turn to populist, sovereigntist narratives promising forest protection and local timber development—solutions that sound plausible but often mask political manipulation. While the EU has provided support, the real unfairness occurs within Romania's borders, perpetuated by the political and business elite.

Given these circumstances, can one really blame the people for being manipulated over actual injustices that occur domestically? Or should the fault lie with the political class and businessmen, who, while promoting European solidarity, exploit Romania's forests for personal gain?

Decades of weak legislation and poor enforcement have led to the destruction of millions of hectares of forest. Traditional forestry knowledge has vanished, forest rangers have disappeared, habitats have collapsed

Balancing Business and Social Responsibility: The EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement

Clara Barbosa | UPF | Analysis

After a concerted effort spanning more than two decades, the European Union and Mercosur (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay) announced the conclusion of negotiations for their trade agreement in December 2024. Amidst a global climate of rising protectionism and commercial unilateralism, this agreement stands as one of the largest bilateral free trade pacts in history. It signals a potential step forward for international trade as a driver of economic development, unlocking significant opportunities to boost bilateral investment while aiming to safeguard policy space in vital areas such as health, innovation, and family farming. Moreover, the agreement is notable for its attempt to incorporate commitments designed to reconcile trade with sustainable development.

However, despite the promising language on paper, the deal has garnered substantial critique regarding its 'sustainability deficit'. Critics argue that the agreement's economic mechanisms may fundamentally conflict with the EU's established environmental and human rights commitments—specifically regarding deforestation, Indigenous rights, and unfair competition for European agriculture.

A central feature of the agreement is the removal of tariffs to encourage greater European demand for Mercosur agricultural products—primarily beef and soy. While economically beneficial for South American agribusiness, this demand is a direct driver of accelerated deforestation in critical biomes. This ecological threat undermines global efforts against climate change and directly impacts the EU's own environmental security goals

Critics argue that the agreement's economic mechanisms may fundamentally conflict with the EU's established environmental and human rights commitments

The expansion of agricultural frontiers to satisfy European consumption often correlates with violent land conflicts and the displacement of Indigenous peoples, the primary protectors of the Amazonian ecosystem.

This is not a theoretical risk but an ongoing reality. For instance, Karipuna Indigenous land in Rondônia, Brazil, has become a notorious target for land invasion. As global demand for cattle and soy rises, illegal loggers and land-grabbers frequently clear Karipuna forest territory to create pastures which are subsequently converted into soy plantations.

Similarly, in the Gran Chaco forest of Paraguay and Argentina—South America's second-largest forest and one of the world's most rapidly deforested areas—Indigenous communities are being displaced by expanding soy monocultures intended for export. These outcomes create a disturbing policy incoherence for the EU: while Brussels champions democratic governance and human rights globally, its trade policy is perceived as indirectly fuelling practices that violate Indigenous rights and accelerate environmental collapse.

Parallel to the environmental critique is the backlash from European farmers, particularly in France, Ireland, and Austria. Their opposition is rooted in the perception of a 'double standard' that penalises European producers. French agricultural unions such as the FNSEA argue that the deal forces them to compete with an unfair disadvantage. For example, under the EU's 'Farm to Fork' strategy, European grain and sugar beet farmers face strict regulations aiming to halve pesticide use. Meanwhile, Brazil remains one of the world's largest consumers of pesticides, including substances like Atrazine that are strictly banned in the EU due to health risks. French farmers view the importation of goods produced with these substances as 'importing the agriculture we don't want'.

This has led to demands for 'Mirror Clauses' (mesures miroirs)—legal mechanisms that would require imported products to be produced under the exact same environmental and sanitary standards as those in the EU. Without these clauses, farmers in Ireland fear that their grass-fed beef industry will be decimated by cheaper, industrial feedlot beef from South America that does not face the same carbon or traceability costs.

Ultimately, the EU-Mercosur agreement stands at a critical crossroad. The commercial rationale—opening vast markets to European cars and machinery in exchange for access to South American agricultural products—is colliding with modern sustainability imperatives.

To avoid an impasse in national parliaments, the European Commission has recently proposed 'splitting' the agreement into a trade pillar—ratifiable by EU institutions alone—and a political cooperation pillar. While this strategy might fast-track the deal, it risks deepening the democratic deficit and fuelling further public resentment. For the agreement to be viable and legitimate the EU must do more than rely on legal technicalities. It must demonstrate that its 'Green Deal' is a global standard, not just a domestic policy. Unless the EU can implement binding safeguards that effectively stop deforestation and ensure reciprocity for its farmers, the deal risks becoming a symbol of hypocrisy rather than partnership

While Brussels champions democratic governance and human rights globally, its trade policy is perceived as indirectly fuelling practices that violate Indigenous rights and accelerate environmental collapse

Ultimately, a critical question must be posed: for whom is this proposed trade agreement truly beneficial? From a purely economic standpoint, the agreement promises substantial advantages for Brazil's large-scale producers and agribusiness conglomerates. Its implementation would undeniably inject dynamism into regional economies, potentially transforming the financial realities of numerous areas reliant on export-driven industries.

However, this potential economic boom must be scrutinised against the background of its true, often hidden, costs. The enthusiasm for increased trade volume and economic growth must be tempered by a careful consideration of the environmental and social consequences that often accompany such

large international agreements. What toll will intensified production take on the Amazon rainforest and other vital biomes? Will the pursuit of greater market access lead to a rollback of environmental protections, or an acceleration of land conflicts? Furthermore, will the benefits be distributed equitably, or will the agreement primarily consolidate wealth and power in the hands of a few major players, potentially marginalising small farmers, Indigenous communities, and local industries that lack the scale to compete? The economic promise is clear, but the underlying social and environmental sacrifice demands a deeper, more ethical accounting.

Ultimately, a critical question must be posed: for whom is this proposed trade agreement truly beneficial?

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Innovation or Tradition: Green Responsibility in the EV Global Value Chain

Hwikyung Lee | UPF | Analysis

This year, the Nobel Prize in Economic Science was awarded to three scholars: Philippe Aghion, Peter Howitt, and Joel Mokyr, who applied Joseph Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction to demonstrate that the driving force of capitalist economic growth lies in technological innovation. Their achievement has introduced a sense of optimism into a world facing persistent economic stagnation, while highlighting the central importance of innovation.

Among the many innovative technologies shaping growth and transformation in the 21st century, one of the most significant is the electric vehicle (EV). As automobiles constitute the main mode of physical transportation, their shift away from fossil fuels and towards electrification has become an urgent priority, particularly as concerns over climate change have intensified since the 1990s. This transition has accelerated swiftly with the advancement of lithium-ion batteries—rechargeable secondary cells that underpin the rapid expansion of the electric vehicle industry.

What, then, are the materials needed for lithium-ion batteries? Are they found everywhere?

Victor | RioTinto Mines, Spain | Unsplash

The European Union, which has long been a leading advocate for carbon-neutrality and environmental action, now actively participates in EV batteries' global value chain. Aside from environmental concerns, energy security and geopolitical challenges have been the primary forces pushing the EU towards the EV industry. The difficulty, however, lies in the fact that the raw materials and production facilities for lithium-ion batteries are heavily concentrated outside Europe, rendering the industry inherently entangled with geopolitical vulnerabilities.

The EU is currently building a range of overseas partnerships to secure strategic autonomy and resilience in its supply chains. One form of cooperation pursued to secure raw materials supply chains and strengthen manufacturing capacities consists largely of Strategic Partnerships on Raw Materials (SPRMs) with developing countries capable of supplying the so-called Critical Raw Materials (CRMs)—including lithium, cobalt, nickel, and rare earth elements. However, these geopolitical breakthroughs risk reproducing the exploitative asymmetries often described as 'green extractivism'.

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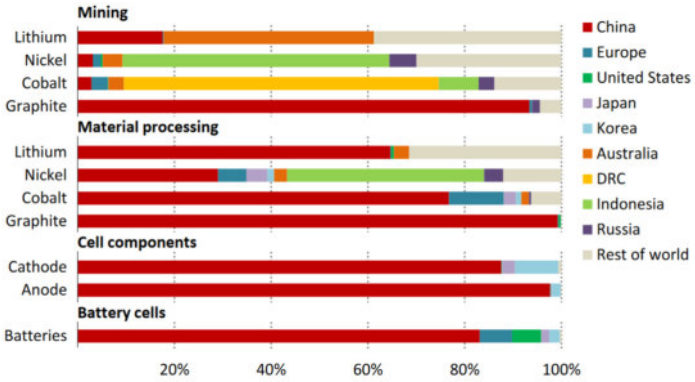
Chile—one of the EU's key partner countries—forms part of the so-called 'Lithium Triangle' together with Argentina and Bolivia, accounting for 60% of the world's lithium supply. As global demand from the tech sector has grown, Chile has experienced a mining boom, and lithium has become a core industry for a country whose GDP is already heavily reliant on mineral resources. However, the water-intensive extraction methods used in Chile's Atacama Desert pose threats to the ecosystem, and the governance of natural resources has failed to adequately include local communities with concerns for environmental justice. Instead, extractivism and financial-compensation systems continue to coexist in ways that run counter to sustainability.

Extractivism and financial-compensation systems continue to coexist in ways that run counter to sustainability

The same applies to Kazakhstan. In a context where mine expansions have led to weak enforcement of environmental regulations and a rise in mining waste, the lack of transparency in cooperation processes under the SPRMs has been criticised. Moreover, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Kazakhstan does not mandate environmental impact assessments, and reports indicate that hazardous mining and metallurgical waste is increasing by roughly one billion tonnes annually, illustrating the risk that raw-material cooperation may accelerate the negative effects of such industries.

There are several environmental actions in EU partnerships. The Critical Raw Material Act (CRMA) follows the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA). These processes include environmental footprint calculation and evaluation of the environmental impacts associated with all stages of the life cycles of raw materials, from extraction to disposal. The responsibility for conducting those assessments is shared among all value chain partners, including raw material suppliers, manufacturers, corporations, and investors.

The problem is that when stringent environmental regulations are imposed, the familiar pattern of risk management and responsibility being disproportionately shifted onto supplier countries or supplier firms re-emerges. This is commonly observed in global value chains (GVC). For instance, in the apparel GVC, labour-rights compliance standards are imposed on manufacturing suppliers, enabling brand-side buyers to select only those producers that meet these requirements.



International Energy Agency (IEA) | Geographical Distribution of the Global Battery Supply Chain | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY 4.0

As a result, buyers—already positioned at the top of the value chain—become effectively insulated from labour-rights issues, while the dual burden of price pressure and compliance with labour standards falls entirely upon suppliers.

The same applies to the supposedly environmentally beneficial EV industry. Raw material due diligence policies are introduced to ensure environmental management systems and sustainability requirements across the entire battery life cycle. However, these obligations are also imposed on small-scale suppliers in developing countries, despite their limited financial capacity and technical knowledge. Such requirements risk further entrenching the disadvantaged position of supplier countries and firms within GVCs, thereby hindering their ability to generate value added.

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To achieve mutual benefits, developing countries require chances to pursue goals such as local value addition, upgrading, and industrialisation.

However, these SPRMs operate within the framework of international law and intersect with existing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and investment agreements. As a result, while partner countries may seek to advance value addition in the raw materials sector through key industrial policy instruments and strategic resource management by the competent authorities, prohibitions imposed by the FTAs and investment agreements limit the policy scope of the parties. Eventually, it also makes it more difficult to achieve more stringent Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) requirements.

Moreover, SPRMs do not resolve the fundamental and structural challenges. Developing countries remain vulnerable to European investors pulling out of partnerships when raw material prices fall or when investors encounter financial pressures. While adequate financial funding is essential, no dedicated funding mechanism has yet been established. In addition, given that China's current leading role in battery production comes at the cost of high levels of overcapacity, mining companies in developing countries are likely to face lower cash flows and narrower margins.

Thus, the environmental problems and structural vulnerabilities faced by developing countries continue to accumulate, while primary reflections on sustainability have been pushed aside. Before setting ambitious goals for values such as human rights and environmental protection—and before constructing new political and economic arenas of competition in their name—should we not first have addressed the structural problems that continue to reproduce the same issues? To achieve real innovation, it seems undeniable that achieving sustainable growth requires fundamental reconsideration for inclusive and cooperative growth.

Biting Off More Than We Can Chew: Northvolt and Europe's Clean-Tech Agenda

Olivia Lindgren | UPF | Analysis

When Northvolt emerged as Europe's flagship battery manufacturer in 2015, the company represented both a promising start-up and a political statement, embodying Europe's vision to fuse climate action with industrial renewal. Northvolt's collapse would ultimately reveal the intricate entanglement between sustainability, security, and politics, serving as a cautionary tale of just how fragile Europe's clean-tech ambitions remain.

Northvolt had a bold vision—to build Europe's largest and most advanced lithium-ion battery factory in Skellefteå, northern Sweden—and to capture 25% of the European battery market by 2030. Both public and private enthusiasm was enormous. Among the public investors were Swedish state-owned Vattenfall, the Swedish Energy Agency (Energimyndigheten), and the Swedish Agency for Innovation Systems (Vinnova). Additionally, private giants such as BMW, Scania, and Volkswagen soon acquired major ownership stakes in the company. European institutions were equally enthusiastic. The European Investment Bank (EIB) provided major financial backing, including a multi-billion-euro green loan—at the time the largest in Europe—intended to cover roughly one-tenth of the factory's total cost. As such, Northvolt was established on the premise that leveraging the Nordic regions' natural resources would help reduce Europe's longstanding dependence on Asian battery manufacturers, thereby also strengthening their positioning in a technology vital to the future of the automotive industry.

As Northvolt secured substantial financial support and political backing, its ambition to produce the 'world's greenest battery' aligned closely with prevailing European priorities regarding environmental politics and strategic security. Everything seemed to signal success, but beneath the political optimism, the facade soon began to crumble. Swedish media revealed that Swedish pension savings had been funnelled into Northvolt through legal loopholes. Operationally, things were no better—the Skellefteå plant performed far below expectations, delivering less than 1% of the planned production capacity in 2023. And despite its promise of European (Swedish) self-sufficiency, Northvolt's supply chain remained deeply entangled with the very dependencies Europe sought to escape.

Everything seemed to signal success, but beneath the political optimism, the facade soon began to crumble

As production setbacks mounted, Northvolt began losing customer orders. Costs soared due to inflation and supply-chain disruptions,

Spisen | Northvolt Ett factory, January 2023 | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 4.0

and the challenge of scaling up battery manufacturing was evident. The company's financial needs seemed bottomless, and 2025 brought the ultimate collapse. The numbers were staggering: two of Northvolt's bankruptcies had debts amounting to 80 billion SEK. Meanwhile, the company's goal of an 'independent' manufacturing process proved illusory—it was reported that Northvolt remained heavily reliant on Chinese suppliers under a 'transition period'. While the dependence itself was hardly surprising given China's dominant position in the global battery value chain, it nevertheless revealed the structural challenges Europe faces in attempting to construct an alternative, autonomous production line.

The dream of a completely European battery appeared more distant than ever, and by August 2025, the American company Lyten announced an agreement to acquire Northvolt's remaining assets in Sweden and Germany. Once a symbol of European industrial independence, Northvolt was now being absorbed by an American actor.

The Northvolt catastrophe should be remembered not as an individual disaster, but as an exposé of the structural weaknesses in Europe's clean-tech strategy. Europe desperately seeks to secure its energy needs independently, reduce strategic dependencies, and accelerate the green transition. Yet, these objectives cannot be achieved through political aspirations alone, but demand long-term commitment, competence, and resilience. Perhaps most importantly, Europe's sustainability agenda cannot exist in isolation, separate from its security policy. Europe's climate policies, industrial ambitions, and security strategy must be treated as a coherent framework, within which the pursuit of sustainability does not come at the expense of security—or vice versa.

Northvolt was meant to be the flagship of Europe's clean industrial future. Instead, it became a symbol of just how vulnerable that same industry is. The company's collapse poses uncomfortable yet essential questions. How should the EU design industrial policies capable of withstanding global competition? How can Europe secure supply chains without replicating old dependencies? And how can public investments be protected from catastrophic losses?

If Europe is to navigate the politics of sustainability while simultaneously safeguarding the EU's long-term security interests, questions such as these must be answered. Northvolt makes it clear that Europe's clean-tech ambitions ultimately depend on the robustness of the political, economic, and security structures that underpin them.

Adam Jones | Beach with oil platforms in Baku, Azerbaijan | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 2.0

Rethinking the EU's Energy Partnership with Azerbaijan: Lessons from Baku's Anti-Colonial Rhetoric

Timoleon Ilias | UPF | Opinion

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the resulting energy crisis, European policymakers finally admitted what many had long warned of: dependence on Russian gas was a strategic mistake. In an effort to resolve this dependence, the EU moved to diversify its energy sources by seeking new partners, among them authoritarian Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan may not be a major player yet, supplying

around 4% of the EU's total gas imports, but a 2022 Memorandum of Understanding between Brussels and Baku set the target of doubling this number by 2027. The relationship is clearly growing stronger. In the words of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission: "The European Union has […] decided to diversify away from Russia and to turn towards more reliable, trustworthy partners. And I am glad to count Azerbaijan among them. You [ed: Azerbaijan] are indeed a crucial energy partner for us [ed: the EU] and you have always been reliable."

This shift raises an obvious question: Has the EU really learnt from its mistakes, or is it simply replacing one authoritarian supplier with another? Turning to Azerbaijan might seem like a pragmatic solution in the short term, but in the long run it risks becoming both a strategic and a moral failure.

The past year has offered several warnings. In May 2024 Azerbaijan escalated tensions with France, accusing it of neo-colonial behaviour and fuelling protests in New Caledonia, a French overseas territory. This sudden concern for anti-colonial causes was hardly genuine. It was likely a reaction to France's support for Armenia, its criticism of Azerbaijan's military assault on the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, and its violations of international law, including its campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Has the EU really learnt from its mistakes, or is it simply replacing one authoritarian supplier with another?

Yet, it is important that a clarification is made. Accusations of neo-colonialism are often well-founded and deserve serious attention. This piece does not seek to deny or minimise historical or contemporary forms of colonial wrongdoing. Rather, it seeks to show how Azerbaijan's Aliyev regime has instrumentalised anti-colonial grievances to advance its own diplomatic and geopolitical interests, and why that instrumentalisation undercuts Baku's credibility as a reliable partner for the EU.

Azerbaijan's response was part of a broader calculated strategy of manipulation. The Aliyev regime fuelled a separatist movement aimed at undermining French influence in New Caledonia, using the Baku Initiative Group (BIG) as the operational instrument. BIG was established at the end of Azerbaijan's Non-Aligned Movement chairmanship in July 2023, with the stated goal of eradicating colonialism. The group has hosted a string of conferences and United Nation panels on French overseas territories. These events, presented as decolonisation forums, were often low-turnout and tightly controlled.

Within the same context, Azerbaijan offered to finance the participation of developing small island states in the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) held in Baku in November 2024, ostensibly to strengthen their role in tackling global environmental challenges. Although at first glance these moves may appear altruistic and such support can address legitimate needs, in reality the fight against climate change and the language of decolonisation frequently served as convenient pretexts for advancing a geopolitical agenda that sought to undermine French influence and gather diplomatic allies. Baku's actions amounted to a demonstration of power, sending a clear message to France and to other actors who might adopt positions contrary to its interests: "Stay out of my affairs, and I will stay out of yours."

The pattern was not limited to France. From mid-2024 Baku also publicly denounced the Netherlands after Dutch parliamentary committees adopted resolutions critical of Azerbaijan and urging protection for Armenian cultural heritage and prisoners. Baku's response stressed the Netherlands' colonial past, including references to its Caribbean territories such as Bonaire, and BIG circulated statements criticising Dutch colonial policies. The pattern reappeared in October 2025, when Azerbaijan directed similar rhetoric towards Belgium, another EU member state. BIG announced that it would organise a conference on Belgian colonialism following the Belgian House of Representatives' unanimous adoption, in July 2025, of a resolution condemning Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, Azerbaijan's actions form part of a broader manipulative and intimidatory strategy. These events demonstrate that Azerbaijan's anti-colonial rhetoric is generally deployed selectively, aimed at states whose parliaments or public institutions have expressed support for Armenia.

This selectivity is telling. While Baku has condem-

ned France, the Netherlands and Belgium, it has largely avoided targeting the United Kingdom, a key economic and military partner whose companies are important to Baku's military capacity. This choice suggests that the anti-colonial argument is instrumental. It is mobilised when it can be used to punish critics or to win diplomatic points, but set aside when it would damage strategic partnerships.

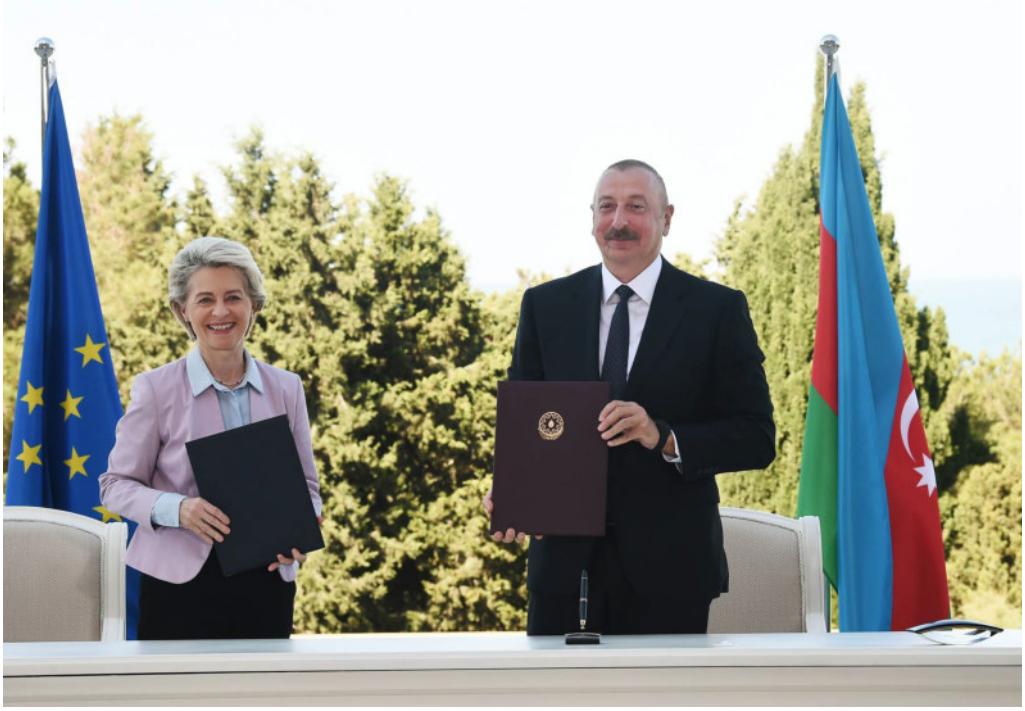
These developments show that Azerbaijan is far from the reliable partner EU officials often describe. If it is willing to openly target member states in operatic diplomatic campaigns, and to turn historical and current grievances into a means of coercion, what guarantee is there that it would not use energy as leverage in a future dispute with Brussels, much like Moscow? The concern is not merely theoretical. Observers have pointed out conceptual and practical parallels between Baku's information operations and the kinds of hybrid influence campaigns more commonly associated with Russia.

Similarities to Turkish rhetoric have also been noted, particularly in the way anti-Western and post-colonial narratives are repackaged for domestic and international audiences.

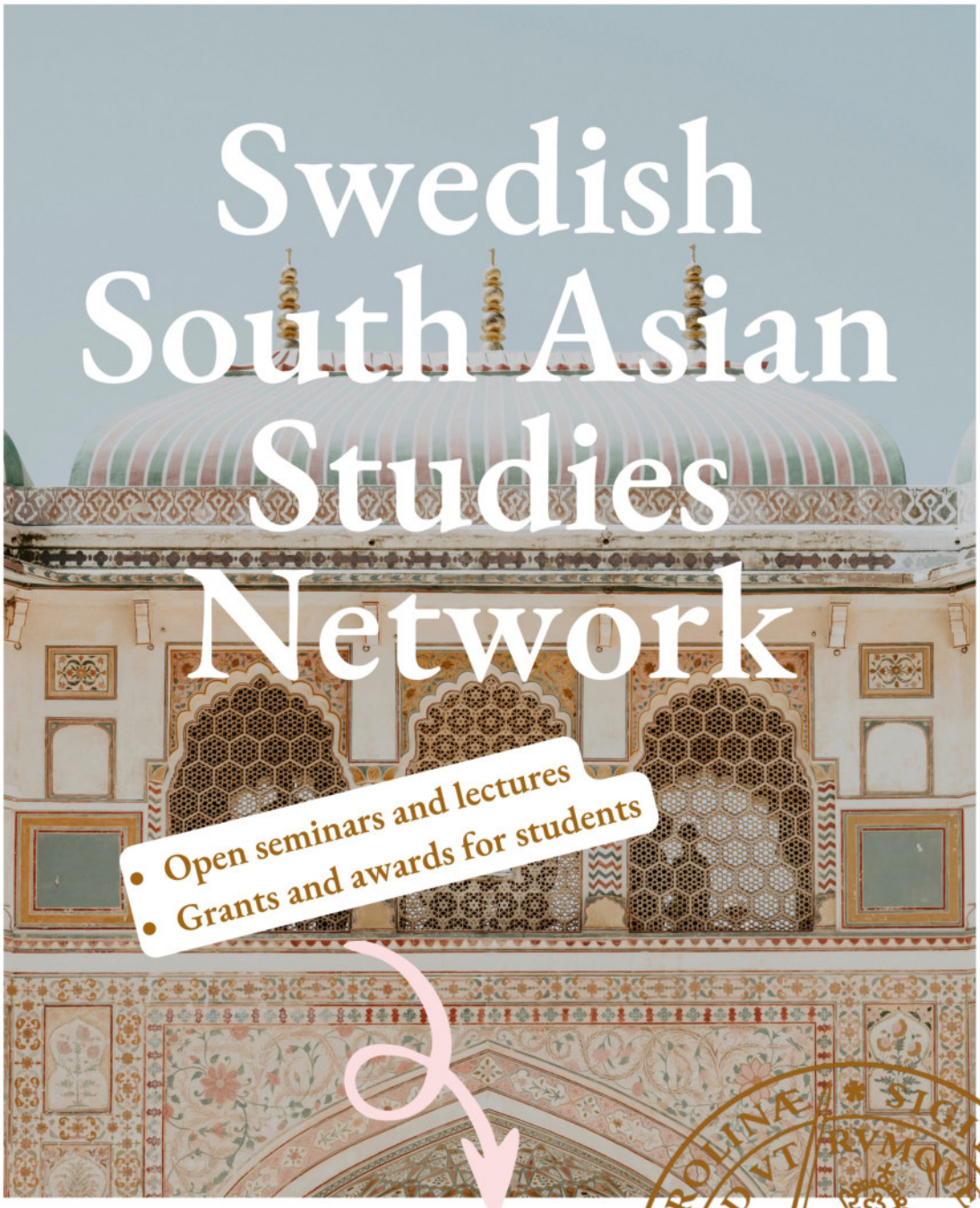
In other words, Azerbaijan is not inventing a new playbook. It is rather recycling familiar authoritarian tactics.

The regime has turned a just cause into a diplomatic weapon, exploiting grievances for political gain. Recognising the harms of colonialism does not prevent actors from exploiting such language for self-interested purposes, turning it into a tool of coercion rather than a call for justice. The EU may have reduced its dependence on Russia, but it risks developing a similar reliance on another authoritarian regime.

The regime has turned a just cause into a diplomatic weapon, exploiting grievances for political gain



Press Service of the President of Azerbaijan | Azerbaijan and EU sign energy partnership MoU | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY 4.0



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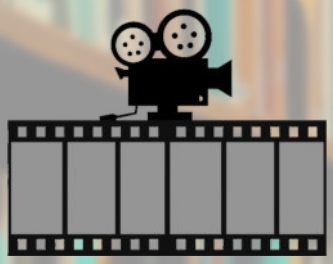


Clara Barbosa

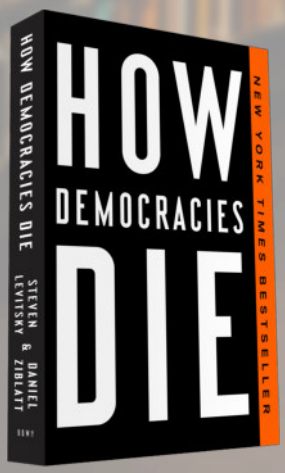
Documentary | Apocalypse in the Tropics

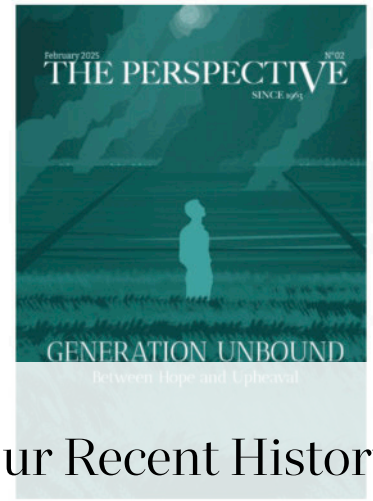
Petra Costa's documentary is essential to understand the roots of Brazil's far-right, which has profoundly affected its foreign policy. The film highlights the powerful domestic alliance between conservative politicians, the military, agribusiness, and evangelical leaders. This political force, heavily supported by evangelical youth, has driven Brazil to realign diplomatically with nations sharing conservative religious values, actively oppose global norms on gender and reproductive rights at the UN and OAS, and shape controversial stances on Amazon protection and global climate negotiations due to agribusiness influence. The documentary provides the crucial context to comprehend the ideological forces steering Brazil's decisions on the world stage.

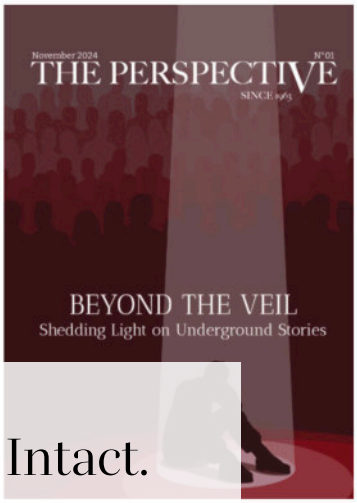
Sofia Mina Pessina

Book | How Democracies Die

This powerful political analysis explores how democracies around the world have eroded not through sudden coups, but through the gradual weakening of institutions by elected leaders. Drawing on historical and global examples, the authors identify key warning signs of authoritarian behavior and stress the importance of democratic norms like mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance. The book serves as both a cautionary tale and a call to action to protect democratic values in the face of rising polarisation and populism.







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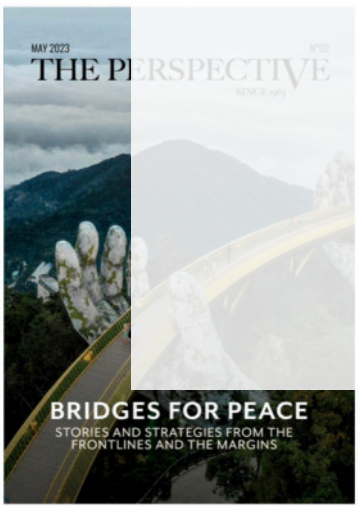

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